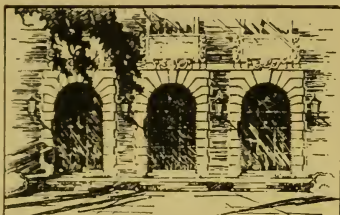


In

Far Lochaber



By William Black



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IN FAR LOCHABER.

BY

WILLIAM BLACK,

AUTHOR OF

"A PRINCESS OF THULE," "MACLEOD OF DARE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

SECOND EDITION.

LONDON :

SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON, SEARLE, & RIVINGTON,
LIMITED,

St. Dunstan's House,

FETTER LANE, FLEET STREET, E.C.

1888.

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IN FAR LOCHABER.



CHAPTER I.

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE.

BUT, as it happened, the very next day brought another communication from Kirk o' Shields that was destined to lead the way to a sudden and unexpected crisis. A little accident helped. When Aunt Gilchrist took the as yet unopened envelope with her into the parlour, where the rest of the family were seated at the table for afternoon tea—the Doctor having also dropped in by chance—and just as she was about to sit down, she struck her foot

sharply against the leg of the chair. For a second she bit her lip in silence, and it was clear she was suffering considerable pain ; then she muttered to herself—

“ Dang this confounded thing ! ”

“ Your language, Jane,” said the Doctor, quite good-naturedly, “ might be a little more gentle.”

“ Oh, my language ! ” she said, opening forth in wrath. “ My language, indeed ! You can talk fine enough about your oxides, and sulphates, and trash o’ that kind, to bamboozle a lot of fools !—but much good your long-winded names have ever done to me ! Here, Alison, run away and get me a cloth slipper—this infernal fire is like to burn my toe off, now it’s begun again ! ”

Alison went quickly away, and returned with a pair of cloth slippers, and forthwith the hurt foot was in a measure relieved. But when Alison was for unbuttoning the

other boot, her aunt said no—the one was enough.

“Why, aunt,” she protested, “do you mean to say you can sit in comfort with a boot on one foot and a shoe on the other?”

“Oh, listen, mother,” Flora cried. “Isn’t that like Alison? Isn’t she prim and precise! She’s bound to grow up an old maid!”

“More likely,” Master Hugh put in, “she’ll grow up to be like the old lady who declared she couldn’t go in proper style to have her photograph taken until she had put some eau-de-Cologne on her handkerchief”—though it is to be imagined that that apocryphal old lady was an invention of the moment.

But meanwhile Aunt Gilchrist had taken her seat, looking very gloomy, for she was vexed that Periphery should have been so easily aroused again. And perhaps she

was all the more taciturn that the young Munroes chose to make themselves surreptitiously merry over her accident, and that they were openly aided and abetted by the Doctor, while Mrs. Munro looked on and listened in mild amusement. Aunt Gilchrist would have nothing to say to that ribald crew. Nay, to escape from them and their covert jeers, she betook herself to her letter, which otherwise might have lain unopened on the table.

And presently it was perceived that the contents thereof were exciting her in no common degree. Indeed, her astonishment and resentment caused her to break forth into brief muttered exclamations—exclamations that showed clearly enough what was passing in her mind.

“Well, I declare!” she cried, with withering contempt. “Bless my soul and body, the woman’s mad!—stark, staring mad! But I’ll teach her! To talk to me

like this! Well, I never did hear the like!"

"What's your news, Jane?" the Doctor asked.

"It's somebody that wants a lesson taught them," said she, looking up fiercely. "And, my word, they'll get it!"

"If it's anything serious," said he amiably enough, "I wouldn't advise you to answer it in your present state of mind."

"My present state of mind!" she retorted with scorn. "What do you know about my present state of mind! I suppose you would like to doctor that too!—brown messes and white messes—once every three hours—to be well shaken—is that the thing this time? Man, man—Duncan, I wonder ye do not take all your phosphates and hydrates and stuff down to the sea some dark night and tumble them in when there's nobody looking!"

"I might as well, if I had many patients

like you, Jane," her brother said with great good-humour ; and presently, this frugal meal being ended, he was the first to rise, as his professional duties called him away again.

But Aunt Gilchrist took Alison with her to her own room.

"There, read that!" said the incensed little dame. "Read that, Alison, and tell me if there's another such impudent woman in the whole wide world!"

Alison took the letter—which she at once perceived to be from Mrs. Cowan of Corbieslaw—and carefully and deliberately read it through ; but as she had no nerves on fire to worry her, she did not find in it anything calculated to arouse so fierce a storm of indignation. She was very much embarrassed, it is true ; for it was all about herself and her prospects ; but in so far as the tone of this communication towards Aunt Gilchrist was concerned, it was

almost servile—indeed it may have been the specious plausibility of the whole epistle that had irritated the recipient of it.

“Well, aunt,” said Alison, “I don’t see anything in that to anger you.”

“Nothing to anger me!” she exclaimed. “What right has that woman to interfere with me? What business has she to write to me at all? So you’re ‘devoted to the service of the Lord,’ are you, ‘and the interests of His church?’ Indeed, now! But does she think I cannot tell what that means? Ay, but I can, though: I was not born yesterday, Alison, my dear; not a bit of it! The service of the Lord is that I’m to provide that stickit minister with a house and a wife at the same time, and support the whole concern. Oh, that’s a fine way of providing for him; better than waiting and waiting for a pulpit. A pulpit, my word! To stick up a crayture like that in a pulpit: I’ll tell ye what he’s

better fit for—I'd stick him up in a corn-field, to frighten the crows away! And then 'the distractions and temptations surrounding young people,'" Aunt Gilchrist continued, turning to the letter again. "Tell me now, Alison: do ye think this woman has a suspicion that there's something between you and Captain Macdonell?"

Alison flushed a rose-red, but she answered frankly enough—

"I don't know, aunt. It is quite possible. I wrote to Agnes the other day about—about Ludovick; and she may by chance have dropped some hint. Or perhaps it's this—Mr. James Cowan met me walking with—with Captain Macdonell in Kirk o Shields one day, and he may have spoken to her about the stranger—and—and perhaps that's it."

"So *I'm* to be her cat's-paw, am I?" Aunt Gilchrist resumed, still indignant

with this hapless letter. “*I’m* to see that the stickit minister is provided for? And it’s all for the service of the Lord, of course, and the interests of the church! My certes, I’ll send her an answer she little expects: I’ll teach her to dictate to me, with her cringing, fawning, sneaking pretences!”

Then she turned to Alison herself.

“Now, Alison,” said she, in a much gentler way, “I’m not blinder than other people; and I’ve seen the way that you and your Captain Ludovick, as they call him, are aye together. I’m not going to ask ye questions, for young folk will have their secrets—it’s part of the play, I suppose; but this I will say to you—this I’m bound to say to you—that ye need not be afraid to speak to me about *him*. No, I give ye my word: I’ve seen enough of him, and I will say this, that a finer, franker, better-natured young man never

stepped in shoes. I was not quite so certain about him at one time; and I took the leeberty of giving him a hint or two—for I'm an old woman, Alison, and ye're a young one; but I do honestly believe this now—I do honestly believe he would take ye this minute if ye had not a penny."

"Aunt," said Alison—but there were tears of gratitude trembling on her lashes, and her voice was not very firm—"there would have been no concealment—and least of all from you—but it all seemed so hopeless. It was broken off because I—because I told him they would never agree to it. He is a Catholic."

"Yes, that's true, he is a Catholic—I had forgotten that. But who's they? That woman Cowan?" said Aunt Gilchrist, beginning to sniff and fume again at the mere mention of her enemy. "What have they got to do with you? Who asked their permission? If you want to

marry the young man, what business is it of theirs whether he is a Catholic or not? The impudence of some people, I do declare!"

"No, aunt, it wasn't the Cowans I was mostly thinking of, nor yet the congregation generally, though I made sure they would be terribly against it; but it is my own family, my father especially. And I thought about Agnes too; but I wrote to her, just to try—and—and I got a letter from her that was a great surprise, so kind it was, and not a word about his being a Catholic."

"And Macdonell—what does he say to all this, eh?" was the next inquiry.

"Well, aunt," Alison made answer, with downcast eyes, "you know he has been away the last day or two, and I haven't been able to show him Agnes's letter."

"Agnes's letter!" she repeated. "But

I suppose he wants to make you his wife, whatever any one may say?"

"I—I think so," was the half-heard answer.

"And I think so too!" Aunt Gilchrist said, with a proud kind of laugh. "Oh, I'll warrant him! Well, Alison, you may be off now, for I'm going to send this woman her answer—oh yes, it'll be an answer, I can tell ye—when I think of the look of her face when she gets it, I could just skip round this room like a three-year-old, only there's that little fire-deevil sitting watching on my toes. And here's another thing, Alison: ye may tell me your secrets, or ye may not tell me your secrets, just as ye please; but ye'll see if I don't make it all fair and straight with your Captain Ludovick as soon as he comes back to Fort William."

Alison lingered, still regarding that letter.

“Aunt Gilchrist,” said she, “you must not say anything that will vex the Cowans. They are great friends of my father’s; and they are important people in the church.”

“The wise little woman!” Aunt Gilchrist said, with another laugh. “Well, perhaps I’ll not answer the fool according to her folly; but I’ll give her a bit of my mind all the same. Now go away, and tell Flora to stop that strumming, for I’m going to write.”

So Alison departed—very grateful to Aunt Gilchrist for the kindly things she had said about Captain Ludovick, but not much reassured otherwise. She knew very well that this brisk, independent, cheerful little Gallio was about the last person to understand the Kirk o’ Shields folk, or what they would think of this proposed marriage. Her ways were not as their ways. The simple and self-sufficing formula, “The Lord made us, and He’ll

take care of us," was a very different thing from their fierce contentions of creed, their strenuous and anxious faith in their own sectarianism. Aunt Gilchrist was delighted to make the most of life and enjoy the good things of this world: with them a heart-searching renunciation was the first duty of every Christian, and an austere contemning of this world the surest passport to the next. And if she seemed disposed to make light of the fact that Ludovick Macdonell was a Catholic, Alison was well aware that the members of East Street Church would be in no such mind.

Meanwhile it was remarkable that when Captain Ludovick was absent from Fort William the days did not pass nearly so quickly; and frequently, when her cousins were otherwise occupied, and her aunt did not need her assistance, Alison had to be content with the companionship of the boy John. She was trying to reform Johnny

now ; but the task was an uphill one. When she endeavoured to reason him out of his belief in witches and warlocks and malevolent spirits, he answered with all kinds of stories of what had actually happened. And then when she remonstrated with him about his own conduct—his cruelty and malice and revengeful tricks—Johnny had always some excuse or another for his wickedness. One morning, as she was getting ready to go downstairs, she casually went to the window which was a habit she had unconsciously formed. She did not wish to play the spy on Johnny ; but this window commanded a view of the garden, the road, and the shore ; and if Johnny was anywhere about, he was sure to be in some mischief or other ; so that she was continually catching him in this fashion, after which she would go and lecture him severely. On this occasion she perceived that Johnny was merely

talking to a small boy who was outside the railings, in the road ; and there did not seem much harm in that. It was clear that Johnny was trying to persuade the small boy to come round by the gate into the garden ; but the other shook his head and remained where he was. Thereupon Johnny took something out of his pocket and showed it. The small boy approached a little nearer. Then Alison made out that what Johnny held in his hand was a common clay pipe ; and now he pulled out a match and lit the pipe, which he passed through the railings to the small boy, who began to smoke. She was very angry that John should have been teaching that flaxen-haired urchin so wicked a practice ; but little did she know what it all meant. She went back to finish her dressing, resolved to rebuke him by-and-by.

When she got hold of him later on she said sternly—

“What were you about this morning, Johnny? I suppose you thought no one saw you? How dare you go and teach a little boy to smoke tobacco!”

Now Johnny, so far from being disconcerted or frightened, grinned in honest anticipation that she would enjoy his little joke.

“Aw, Cosh, it wass the finest thing I ever sah!” said he. “He wass getting seecker and seecker, and whiter and whiter; and before he went aweh he could scarcely crahl along the road!”

Then a suspicion of the truth flashed upon her.

“Do you mean to say,” she demanded, “that you deliberately got that little boy to smoke in order to make him sick?”

“Well,” said Johnny, sturdily, “there hass been more as once that him and his big brother they were throwing stons at me. And I said to myself, ‘Ferry well; throw

aweh ; it is your turn now, but it will be my turn some other time."

"Yes," said she indignantly, "but you took good care it was not the big brother you were revenged on!"

Johnny was not a whit abashed by this taunt.

"Well," said he, "the big brother is bigger than me, and he throws stons at me ; and if the little one is smaller than me, then it is my turn. Two is too many for one ; but when you get them separate, then is the chance. Cosh, that one will not be for throwing stons for a little while ! And if he did not want to smok, what made him smok ?"

"I suppose you pretended to be friends with him ?" said she ; but in truth she despaired of bringing this incorrigible lad to a sense of his iniquities.

Johnny grinned again.

"Oh ay, he wass ferry suspeecious at

the first. Mebbe he thought there wass gunpooter in the pipe. But I had to light it myself and gif it to him ; and I said he would never be a man at ahl until he learned to smok ; and I said that smokkin wass ferry nice—and mebbe so it uz, or they would not be ahl at it. But where is he now ?” continued Johnny, with a sudden incoherent laugh of fiendishness. “ Well, I think he is lying down on the shore, with his head on the cold stons, and his cheeks as white as a sheet of paper ! ”

“ I suppose you think it very clever to torture a small boy like that ! ” said she angrily. “ But wait a little. Wait till he tells his people at home—wait till he tells his big brother—then you’ll catch it ! ”

But this threat was not of the least avail.

“ No, no ; I’m not thinking he will do that,” Johnny said coolly. “ He will not say a word to any one, not to any one at

ahl, for fear of a strapping. He will not say a word. But he will be in less of a hurry to throw stons at me again ! ”

And then once more she had to give up the task of reforming this reprobate as something quite hopeless ; for Johnny had always some argument with which to meet her remonstrances. Nor was it any use to warn him that sooner or later he would receive a sound thrashing, for he had been let off too many times before ; besides, in this strange world in which he found himself, surrounded on all hands by malevolent creatures, armed with fists and claws and hoofs and stings to injure him, he had so much to do in fighting these enemies and in getting his revenge (either on them or their congeners) that he soon forgot warnings. He was too busy, in fact—for he was determined not to have the worst of this incessant conflict ; and where he could not win to victory by strength, he could

fall back upon a very respectable fund of patience and astuteness and malicious cunning.

One evening Flora and Alison were strolling backward and forward through the garden, arm-in-arm. They were bare-headed, for the air was warm and still; Flora carried a scarlet double poppy hanging from her hand, Alison had a white rose at her neck. And no doubt any passer-by would have thought that these two pensive maidens were merely drinking in the balmy air, and idly regarding the various bright beds of pansies and snapdragon and sweet-william; whereas the truth was that Miss Flora was entertaining her companion with sundry experiences of her own, especially as regards young men, and their insensate folly and simplicity as she had seen these exhibited on diverse occasions. It was hardly an edifying conversation; for Miss Flora

frankly confessed that nothing delighted her so much as to see two young men at daggers drawn on her account, and trying darkly to conceal the same. Her own cantrips and coquetries were lightly glossed over ; but Alison could guess a good deal : she knew where lay the origin of these bitter underhand bickerings and strivings and animosities. The demure smile that was in this handsome damsel's eyes was a sufficient admission.

"Hullo!" she exclaimed, happening to look along the road, "there's Ludovick come back." And then, as a sudden after-thought, "Well, I'm going round to Mrs. MacInnes', to beg for some sprays of her copper beech for the dining-room fireplace. I wonder why some of the old people call it the 'bloody' beech : some legend, most likely. I suppose I can go round without getting my bonnet."

So she went down to the gate just in

time to meet Ludovick there ; shook hands with him, and asked him about certain common friends of theirs in Edinburgh ; and then went carelessly on her way. By this means she left him to find Alison alone in the garden.

“ I have something to tell you, Ludovick,” said she rather shyly, when he came up.

“ And I can see by your face that it isn't very bad news,” said he. “ Let's sit down on this seat, and you can tell me all about it. Well ? ”

“ I have heard from Agnes,” she said, when they were seated together, just outside the house.

“ Yes, and she hasn't cried ‘ Bogey ’ at all ? ” he said cheerfully.

“ No—— ”

“ Didn't I tell you ? ” he broke in. “ Wasn't I sure of it ? Well, now, there is some encouragement for you : that will give

you heart of grace for a beginning at least——”

“Yes, but, Ludovick,” Alison said, with a kind of rueful smile, “it’s all very well for you to make light of difficulties—for you simply won’t look at them. Now, in this letter it is rather odd that Agnes doesn’t say a single word about your being a Catholic——”

“Why should she?” he asked. “Why should anybody?”

“But I particularly mentioned it,” was her reply, for she had been pondering over this matter, “and told her all my perplexities, and what I feared. Well, she doesn’t say a word in answer to all that! She says a lot of very nice things about you, and is very kind to me; but there’s not a word with regard to the very question I wrote to her about!”

“Because that is unnecessary,” said he, “and she knew it.”

Alison shook her head doubtfully.

"I am not so sure," she said. "However, there is one thing I must tell you. Aunt Gilchrist knows all about it now, and she approves——"

"Of course she does!" said this hapless young man, who did not dream how soon his buoyant confidence and dearest hopes were all to be dashed to the ground. "I could have foretold that. Your Aunt Gilchrist and I are excellent friends, and quite understand each other. We had a talk last summer—about you. But what led her to say anything definite?"

"There's a Mrs. Cowan," Alison made answer, rather hanging down her head the while. "I—I told you—about that young man——"

"Oh yes, I remember," said he carelessly; "the fellow with the long-tailed coat and the flabby trousers."

"And—and Mrs. Cowan wrote to Aunt Gilchrist about him—and about me——"

“Really! That was very kind—very considerate,” he said—for he did not seem to concern himself much about this rival. “She wanted to secure the prize for her hopeful son. Very natural. Well?”

“Well, Aunt Gilchrist was very angry—besides, she happened to hurt her foot just as she got the letter, and that made her all the more irritable; and before sending her answer she questioned me about—about you, Ludovick—and she approved at once, and without hardly saying anything about your being a Catholic——”

“There!” said he. “There is another one!”

But Alison was not so confident as he was.

“I am afraid that answer of Aunt Gilchrist’s will make mischief, Ludovick,” she said absently.

“Oh, nonsense!” he cried. “Why, Alison, you mustn’t be afraid of those

people. You're in Lochaber now—you're not in Kirk o' Shields! I believe they cow you when they get you among them—you that have courage and nerve for anything when your own natural self gets the upper hand. Here you are not frightened of anything—I believe you'd face Johnny's big Duffle himself if you saw him coming along the road. And now you have got an answer from the only two people you have consulted; and you see they don't anticipate any terrible opposition. Of course," said he presently, with more of gentle consideration in his voice, "I quite understand your hesitation. You find yourself at present very much alone. You don't know what may happen; and you have been brought up to put weight on the opinion of all those people. But you see, Alison, if once the definite step were taken, you wouldn't be any longer alone; you would have given me the right to be

your protector ; and I can answer for it that I will take care you shan't be harmed or interfered with by anybody's opinion or opposition. You are alone now. You wouldn't be alone then."

She looked up to him, as if already appealing for that guidance and protection, and she said—

"Then what would you have me do now ?"

"Well," said he, "I don't think you could do better, in order to be rid of all these anxieties, than write to your father at once, and tell him frankly the whole position of affairs."

Her eyes widened with a sudden apprehension ; then she said gravely—

"I would rather wait—until I could speak to him. Writing seems so cold a thing."

He said with a smile—

"Won't you have lost a great part of

your courage, Alison, when once you are back in Kirk o' Shields? And in the mean time, why should you suffer anxiety, when the way is clear?"

The way was not so clear as he imagined. At this moment Flora made her appearance, approaching the gate with a few branches of the "bloody beech" in her hand. As she came up through the garden she said—

"Now you may scold me, Alison, as much as you please. I met the postman this afternoon, and got the letters from him, and the one for you I put in my pocket, and forgot all about it until a couple of minutes ago. Here it is. I'm very sorry!"

"I'm sure it doesn't matter," Alison said, as she took the letter from Flora, who straightway went into the house with her leaves.

And then Alison glanced at the envelope, and started slightly.

"This is from Agnes," said she to her companion. "You won't mind my opening it?—perhaps she has something further to say."

As for him, he was anticipating no evil, and it did not occur to him to watch the expression of her face as she ran her frightened eyes over these brief pages, that were written in a tremulous and uncertain hand. Her lips grew very pale, but she said nothing. Even when she had finished she did not stir; she seemed scarcely to breathe; she held the letter in her clinched fingers, and blankly gazed at it.

"DEAREST ALISON," her sister wrote, in that trembling hand, "I hardly know how to tell you. Something dreadful has happened. Mrs. Cowan has been here—and saw father. Then he came to me, and questioned me—only a few words—

but I have never seen him look like that before—oh, it was terrible! and his eyes were like coals, and he spoke to me as he never spoke before. And what he said was that I was to sit down and write to you that unless you were back home within four and twenty hours after getting this letter, the door of the house would be shut on you for ever. Dear Alison, my heart is just like to break; but what can I do but send you the message? Come home quick, quick, and go to him yourself. He said he was glad mother was dead—but oh! it was his look that was so terrible. Come home quick, Alison, for I don't know what to do.

“AGNES.”

Ludovick Macdonell was idly gazing across the loch, and at the darkening opposite hills, behind which the sun had already sank, while he waited for his com-

panion to finish her letter. But when he heard her utter a brief sigh he turned quickly, and it was well that he did so, for he found she had grown deathly white, and in another moment she would have fallen senseless from the seat.

CHAPTER II.

IN EXTREMITY.

THE evening after-glow had deepened and richened in its marvellous intensity of light and colour ; for while in the shining skies overhead there hung masses of crimson cloud* that were soft and ethereal in their reposeful majesty and calm, down here the wide waters of the loch were all of a lambent ruddy-purple, broken everywhere by multitudinous swift-glancing ripples—black shuttles they seemed to be, darting transversely hither and thither through the rose-violet fire. And yet, despite this final glory in sky and sea, a sombre darkness was gathering over the western hills

behind which the sun had gone down ; and the profound and hushed silence prevailing everywhere seemed to tell of the coming of the night.

And it was under these still shining heavens and by the side of these lustrous waters that Alison and her lover walked slowly to and fro, he earnestly pleading with her, she almost too distraught to make answer ; for the meaning of that letter was plain enough. The end had come.

“ Ludovick,” she said at length, between her only half-concealed sobs, “ since ever we two met it has been one good-bye after another, but this is the last ; and it is better it should be the last. It was all a mistake from the beginning. And I have been the one to blame, I know that. I should have discovered you were a Catholic ; and then—and then, after knowing it, I should never have come back to Fort

William. I thought it would be easy enough. I thought we could be friends. But I am the one that is to blame; and I—I shall have to bear the punishment; for you are a man—you will forget it all in a year or two; but I am a woman—it will go with me through life.”

“Come, don’t talk like that, Alison!” he said to her, but very gently. “Things are not so bad as that. But they are bad enough; and I will tell you what it is I fear. You see, when you are left to your own judgment, when you are removed from certain influences, when you are here in the Highlands, in short, I do believe you are the most clear-sighted, courageous, self-possessed woman I have ever met with; but as soon as you go back to that town you surrender yourself and become quite a different being. You are afraid of the congregation; the elders’ wives are all-important to you; why, you even seem

to owe some mysterious duty to those ancient Blairs of Moss-end—who were no doubt worthy old gentlemen in their own day, walking according to their lights, just as you should do now, without being tyrannized over by them or their ghosts. Here in the Highlands you are bright and merry and talkative, and happy as the day is long ; there you are a timorous frightened creature, who will hardly hold out your hand when a friend calls on you. I don't know whether it's the moral atmosphere of the place, or the physical, or both ; but what I fear is that when you go back there you will lose your self-possession, you will let them do with you what they like, and then what will be the end ? Why, that you and I may never see each other again in this world."

"Ludovick, what else is there ?" she said piteously.

"I wish you had never gone back to

that town!" he exclaimed almost angrily. "Why was I such a fool as to let you go back last summer?—why am I such a fool as to let you go back now?"

"Ludovick," said she, with an accent of reproach, "would you have the door of my father's house shut against me for ever?"

"Well, I know what will happen," he said. "I know it to a certainty. I tell you, Alison, I do believe I understand you better than you understand yourself. I have reasoned it all out many a time—after what Flora told me. Many a night I used to lie awake in the dahabeeah we had on the Nile—a fine place for thinking it was, the hammock slung in the small cabin, and hardly a whisper heard of the water outside—and I went over again and again all Flora's explanations, and I got to see pretty well how you were situated. And haven't I told you before now that you are a far more human kind of being in

the Highlands—that you show all your frank qualities of mind and disposition—that, in fact, you are the Alison that all of us up here have got to be so fond of. But what are you in Kirk o' Shields!—the Minister's daughter, a cowed creature, superstitious, timorous, with all your natural gaiety crushed out of you by the fear of the congregation. Oh, upon my soul it's too bad!" he exclaimed, in his hot impetuosity. "It's too bad! You—who have the spirit of a lark—who are naturally as light-hearted as a bird—and—and merry—for you to be chained down—to be shut up in that dungeon—that hole—it's too bad!"

But this indignant and incoherent protest brought no light of direction with it.

"It isn't every one who can choose," she made answer rather sadly. "And it's all very well for you, Ludovick, to make light of duties; but the duties are there; and it

would be better not to live at all than to live with a conscience that would always be reproaching you."

"Oh, now you're beginning to talk like Kirk o' Shields!" he said roughly. "I wish you would talk like our Alison—like the Alison we know."

"And what would you have me say, Ludovick—except good-bye?"

The question was a simple one, not to say a pathetic one; but it received no answer. His soul within him was chafing against these unseen bonds, that were all the more vexatious that they were impalpable and not to be seized and broken asunder. He walked on in silence by her side, his brows knit, his eyes fixed mostly on the ground. As for her, she was regarding the now fading glories of sea and sky with the knowledge that, here at least, she should never look on them again. She was taking farewell of them, as it

were. She was Princess Deirdri, gazing for the last time on the land where she had been beloved and happy.

“Alison,” said he presently, “have you definitely resolved to go back to Kirk o’ Shields to-morrow?”

“What else can I do, Ludovick?” she said. “I cannot have my father’s house shut against me. I must go back.”

“Then, as I say, I know what will happen. Here and now you might make a resolution—I might even claim a promise from you; but there you would soon be under the power of old influences and associations; and you would let yourself be led. Do you forget what your aunt Gilchrist told me?—that you were very nearly being induced to marry that wretched creature of a divinity student——”

“But that was different, Ludovick!” she exclaimed, in eager self-justification. “I—I thought it was all over between you

and me—I knew it was—and I didn't seem to care what happened——”

“And won't the same thing occur again?” he said. “The moment you go back you will be forbidden to have any communication with such a frightful monster as a Catholic—and the years will go by—and some fine day I shall hear of my Alison being married to that stickit minister, as your aunt calls him. That will be a pleasant thing for me to hear.”

“I don't think you ever will, Ludovick,” she said, in rather a low voice.

“You don't think so now, because you are here, on the shores of Loch Eil; but you may think differently when two or three years of living in Kirk o' Shields, among all those people, have changed you. And I wonder what Mrs. James Cowan—that is the name you will be wearing then, isn't it?—I wonder what Mrs. James Cowan will be saying to herself when she

sees in the newspaper that the Ludovick she used to know in other days has got married too? I wonder what she will be thinking then? or will she think at all? I suppose she will have forgotten there ever was such a person, or that she was ever in such a place as Lochaber."

"You are not—not very kind to me to-night, Ludovick," she said, in tremulous tones, "and—and I am going away to-morrow."

He suddenly stopped (a gray twilight lay over the land now; and these two figures were quite dark against the wan lilac of the water), and he took both her hands in his, and held them tight.

"Sweetheart," said he, in a very different voice, "don't heed what I have been saying! The very idea of losing you altogether maddens me! I can't bear your going away—when I think of what may happen, with distance and perhaps

years separating us ; and when I see you standing here so close to me, and not very happy, I suppose—you, my own Alison, that should be mine always—and yet you are going away from me—well, I was too impatient—and you will forgive me !”

These appealing sentences had to cease ; some belated traveller was coming along the road ; and they had to resume their walk in silence until he had passed. Then he said—

“ You see, Alison, what I was thinking of is this : it is so easy for two young people to say they will never marry if they cannot marry each other ; and they make promises and vows ; and they separate, quite sure of each other’s constancy. It’s the commonest thing in the world. But circumstances are strong ; you can never tell what may happen in absence ; misrepresentations may be made, or false rumours get about ; and friends and rela-

tives may be urgent until—well, until one of the lovers forgets what she has promised, or is perhaps piqued by false reports into marrying some one else; and the other one—well, he is miserable enough for a time, but he gives up the dreams of his youth, and by-and-by consoles himself as best he may. Oh, I assure you,” he continued (and now the whole twilit world was to themselves, and there was not a sound but the monotonous plash of the ripples along the sea-weed), “I could preach to you for an hour on that subject; for I’ve been preached to, again and again, and in very similar circumstances. I should like to tell you the story, Alison: perhaps you would care to know what the two sweet-hearts did?”

He paused in his walk, while she stopped too. He was regarding her curiously; her eyes were downcast; probably she was listening with sadly wandering thoughts;

for how could a story interest one who was about to say good-bye for ever to the man she loved?

“They were both friends of mine,” Ludovick continued cheerfully enough, though he never for a moment removed his eyes from her downcast face. “One of them indeed was my chum—Ogilvie his name. Well, at that time his regiment was stationed at Fort George; and it was at the Northern Counties Ball at Inverness that he met the youngest of the Ramsay girls—the Ramsays of Kilcoultrie—Lilias I think her name was, but I’ve often heard her called the Flower of Strath-glas—and the two of them took such a fancy for each other that they were like Romeo and Juliet over again. He was quite daft about her—managed to get invitations to any country-house she might be stopping at—and worried his colonel’s life out for leave. But the Ramsay family wouldn’t

hear of it; they are very wealthy—and besides she had become quite a famous beauty; and young Ogilvie had little beyond his pay. At last they forbade him to have any communication with her; and as they found that wasn't enough, they resolved upon sending the Flower of Strath-glas to the south of Ireland, where she had some relatives, to live there for an indefinite time. Ogilvie came to me. I got preached at, as I tell you. He was quite pathetic, and magnified all the dangers of the threatened separation; but I don't think I would have intermeddled on his account, if the young lady had not come and appealed to me as well. That finished me; I couldn't refuse; and when I found out what pluck she had, I became party to a little scheme, though the Ramsay family have no idea until this day that I had anything to do with it. The short and the long of it was that one fine morn-

ing these two young people, without saying by your leave or with your leave, got quietly married in Inverness—and no one knew anything about it for nearly three years thereafter.”

“They got married?” Alison repeated, rather faintly—and she raised her face with asking eyes.

He was regarding her intently: her raised eyes were seeking, and fearing, to read the meaning in his.

“But that is not what I would have done,” he said slowly. “I would have no secret marriage—not a bit. If I were in a position like that—and if the girl had courage enough—and if there was a chance of our being separated for ever—then I might ask her to go through a form of civil marriage before the sheriff, because that could be done instantly, and there could be no chance of interference; but immediately it was over, I should want everybody to

know who cared to know. I should want to be able to say, 'She is mine; you can't touch her now; she may go back to her own home, if she thinks her duty lies that way, but she is mine: absence and threats and persuasions are of no avail now; sooner or later we shall come together again; in the mean time we will wait, if there is reason for waiting, but you cannot divide us the one from the other any more.' Alison," he said, "what is your answer?"

She uttered a little cry, and buried her face in his bosom.

"Oh, Ludovick!" was all she could say.

"Understand," he continued, "I don't want to drag you into any secret marriage—any hole-and-corner marriage. I want everybody to know who has the right to know. I should like you to go right back now and let me tell Hugh and Flora, and Mr. and Mrs. Munro, and your aunt Gilchrist what we are going to do to-morrow

morning; and after we have been to the sheriff's chambers, then you are free to go back to Kirk o' Shields. Isn't it simple, Alison? You are mine—but I want you to be safely mine, that is all!"

She withdrew herself from his embrace.

"It is late," she said; "they will be wondering."

Indeed she hardly seemed to know what she said; and when they turned to walk back to the outskirts of the little town—where the orange lamps were beginning to appear in the dusk—he led her by the hand, as if she had been a child, while he was persuading her that this step he was urging her to take was reasonable and natural and justifiable. She listened in silence. Once only, in the midst of his earnest, his almost passionate, pleadings, she stopped him.

"Ludovick," she said, "if—if I hesitate—don't think it is because I do not love

you, or am afraid to trust you. I have trusted you ; I have given myself to you ; what more can I do than that ? But—but this is so sudden.”

And then again he said, very gently—

“I know, dearest Alison, that it is a very startling thing, but the circumstances are imperative. You are going away to-morrow morning : it is a question of hours. But if you are so alarmed, wouldn't you ask the advice of your friends ? Wouldn't you ask Flora and Hugh and Mrs. Gilchrist ? They can only wish for your good. I don't quite say you should ask the Doctor and Mrs. Munro ; for, you see, you are staying in their house, and they are in a way responsible for you to your father ; but your aunt Gilchrist—she knows how you are situated, she is exceedingly fond of you : why not ask her ? In any case you would have to give her some reason for your going away so sud-

denly ; why not give her the true reason, and tell her what I want you to do ? ”

“ Yes—yes—perhaps,” Alison answered absently : her thoughts were flying far afield.

But as it chanced it was Hugh and Flora who were first called into counsel. As Ludovick and his companion were getting back to the small garden-enclosed villas they perceived two dark figures coming along the road towards them, and as these drew near they could be made out to be Alison’s cousins.

“ Why, where have you two been ? ” Flora cried, with good-humoured reproach.

“ I will apologize to your mother the moment we get back,” Ludovick said at once, “ for having kept Alison out so late ; but the fact is something serious has happened, and we had many matters to talk over that could only be spoken of

between ourselves. She is going back to Kirk o' Shields to-morrow morning."

"What! Alison?" cried Flora; and instinctively the girl seized hold of her cousin's hand, as if she would detain her there and then, and prevent any such spiriting away. "What do you mean, Ludovick?"

"It is for Alison herself to say how much I am to tell you," he answered.

She hesitated only for a moment.

"Everything, Ludovick—everything," she said.

Well, thereupon Captain Ludovick told his two friends the whole story of their engagement (which was hardly news, perhaps), of Alison's hopes that her friends in Kirk o' Shields might perchance be brought to sanction the marriage, of the peremptory letter received that evening, and also of his daring proposal for the morrow morning; and he hinted that

Alison was looking to them for some advice and assistance in the straits in which she found herself.

“Well, look here, Ludovick,” Hugh said frankly, “I for one am dead against it. I can foresee nothing but trouble—for Alison first, and for both of you after. You would land yourself in for you don’t know what. But in any case where is the use of talking? You couldn’t get married in that hasty fashion if you tried. How could you get married at an hour or two’s notice?”

“The simplest thing in the world,” was the confident rejoinder. “My dear lad, I’ve been through it—as best man, that is; I know all about it. You get a lawyer to draw out a declaration; Alison and I sign it; you have two witnesses—you’ll be one, Hugh, and the lawyer the other; then you take it along to the sheriff-substitute; he reads it over and signs it; you take the

warrant along to the registrar, and the ceremony is complete. Simplest thing in the world !”

And then as they were going up through the garden to the open door of the house he told them the story he had told to Alison, in explanation of his knowledge of these particulars.

“ But, Ludovick,” said Flora, who had not yet expressed either approval or disapproval, “ how did that marriage turn out in the end ? ”

“ Why, excellently — excellently ! ” he said, with unnecessary eagerness. “ The Ramsays saw it was no use crying over spilt milk ; they made it up with the young people very soon after the truth became known ; and I must say the old man behaved very handsomely. As for Major Ogilvie and his wife—well, I went with them as far as Suez last winter, when they were going to India, and I’m sure there

wasn't a happier or merrier couple on board."

"Well, I don't know, Ludovick," Hugh said doubtfully, as they were going into the house; "but I for one wouldn't advise Alison to do anything of that kind."

"Anything of what kind!" Captain Ludovick protested. "This isn't a secret marriage at all! This is as open as the day!"

He could say nothing further at the moment, for they had reached the dining-room door, and Mrs. Munro came out to scold the two recusants (as well as she could scold anybody), and to inform them that they should have to sup by their two selves, as the rest of the family had declined to wait for them.

It was not supper that was in Alison's mind. She asked for her Aunt Gilchrist. She was told that the old lady had gone to her own room. Thither, accordingly,

Alison repaired—but slowly and thoughtfully, for she did not know how she was to acquaint her with what had happened.

And when she came to the door she paused there, irresolute, that she might gain some composure; for her heart was full. Aunt Gilchrist had been more than kind to her. And now she was come to say good-bye; and she did not wish to appear ungrateful. There was something else that was bringing her near to tears; but she was trying to put that aside for the moment.

At last she summoned up courage, and tapped at the door.

“Come in!” called a cheerful voice; and then on entering she found her aunt seated by the little window-table, the gas lit, and an open desk beside her.

“Well, what does my bit lady want?” Aunt Gilchrist asked encouragingly enough, as she laid aside the legal-looking

document she had been reading. "I was just looking at your name, my dear, in that paper there."

The girl went forward, hesitating—not able to speak—and then she sank on to her knees, and buried her head in the old dame's lap, and burst into a passionate fit of crying.

"Oh, you've been so good to me, Aunt Gilchrist—you've been so good to me!" she sobbed. "And I'm going away to-morrow morning; and perhaps they'll never let me come to see you again!"

"Mercy on us, what in all the world is this now?" exclaimed Aunt Gilchrist, in a swift blaze of anger. "Going away? Who says that? Tell me who says that!"

But Alison could only sob and sob, and made no answer; and pity for the grief-stricken child before her quickly interfered with the old dame's wrath against these

persons unknown. She put her hand on the soft brown hair.

“Ailie, my dear,” said she, “what’s all this now? Why, I’ve just been delighted this while back to see you so light-hearted and blithe and merry, and now all of a sudden it’s gone, and you’re struck down, and crying like a bairn. What is it, my dear? There, now, get up and dry your eyes, and take that chair, and tell me the whole story. I warrant it’s none o’ your own wrong-doing; I’ll be bound for that. But I know there’s folk in this world just that contentious and cantankerous that they’ll not let things go smoothly on. And to interfere with such an innocent creature as you! I say interfere; for unless faces tell lies, ye’ve been a very happy young madam since ye’ve been in Fort William this time. Oh, I’m not asking for secrets, never fear; but old as I am I can see what’s as plain as a pikestaff to everybody

else. Well, now, that's a dear! there's my lamb! you just draw your chair close up, and keep quiet and peaceful, and tell me the whole story."

But Alison could not so quickly recover her self-control; and so, as the simplest key to the whole situation, she took out the letter that had summoned her to the south, and without a word handed it to her aunt Gilchrist. And no sooner had the little old dame begun to read Agnes's trembling lines than it was quickly apparent she had forgotten those exhortations to peacefulness and calm which she had been impressing on her niece but a moment before. Her eyes began to burn; her teeth were set hard with indignation; and at last she dashed down the letter on the table with her clinched fist.

"It's *that woman*, Alison!" she exclaimed, with suppressed fury. "It's that woman that's at the bottom o't; and I

declare to ye she'll never rest until I set my ten nails on her smirking, sniggering, simpering face! I wish I could see that great yellow hogshead o' a husband o' hers take a thick stick to her back; that would teach her to interfere in other folk's affairs. But I've not done wi' her yet—my word, I've not; and for your father to be led away by a cringing, mincing, scheming, double-faced, wicked woman like that—oh, it would drive a saint wild! Has he no eyes? Does he no see that all her concern is to get you to marry that bit o' washed-out rag that they hope to make a minister o'?"

Alison shook her head.

"No, aunt, it—it isn't that has made my father threaten to shut the door on me. Can you remember—in the letter you sent to Mrs. Cowan—whether you happened to say that—that Ludovick was a Catholic?"

"Of course I did!" said Aunt Gilchrist,

with rather a triumphant air ; “ of course I did ! I thought I would give her a fright—her and her tallow-candle-faced son ! Certainly I told her what *our* notions were as to your probable future, my dear ; and I let her know pretty plainly that the probationer was *not* included ! ”

“ Ah, that is it, then,” Alison said sadly enough. “ She has taken the letter to my father ; and no doubt she made the most of Ludovick’s being a Catholic. Well, it does not matter. He would have had to know sooner or later ; and I suppose this is what would have been the end in any case.”

“ And so you are really going away back to-morrow morning, Alison ? ” the old lady demanded, with a curious look of interrogation.

“ Yes ; what else can I do ? ” the girl answered simply. “ And I came to thank you, dear aunt, or to try to thank you, for all your goodness to me—— ”

"We'll say nothing about that," Aunt Gilchrist broke in without ceremony. "This is what I want to know—have ye put all this affair before Captain Ludovick?"

"Oh yes, indeed, aunt."

"And—and what does he say about it?" the old dame inquired, in an off-hand kind of fashion, but still regarding her niece.

Alison hesitated. What was the use of disclosing that wild scheme, when it had already met with Hugh's distinct disapproval, and with Flora's hardly less significant silence? Yet Ludovick had appealed to her to include Aunt Gilchrist also among her counsellors; and so, briefly enough, and with downcast eyes, she told the little dame what it was that Ludovick Macdonell had proposed should be done on the very next morning.

And what a change came over Aunt Gilchrist's face during this recital! At

first there was merely surprise ; but when she fully understood what was in contemplation she became quite radiant and exultant.

“Well done !—well done !” she cried, with a kind of proud laugh. “There’s a proper kind o’ man ! there’s a fellow for ye ! there’s my brave laddie !—and so *that’s* the answer he’s sending back to they folk in Kirk o’ Shields !” She laughed aloud in her delight. “I declare to ye, Alison, I could take three skips o’er the floor and back again, if it werena for that wee deevil Periphery that’s waiting for me ! I thought, now, he wouldna be for letting you slip through his fingers ! My word, that’s a good one ! that’s the way to carry the war into the enemy’s camp. And you—what do you say ? Is it to be ‘hey the bonny breast-knots’ before ye go away by the steamer ? Are we to have a wedding sprung on us at a moment’s notice ? As

sure as I'm alive, Alison Blair, if ye get married the morn's morning, I'll dance a reel wi' your good man in the evening, ay, if I die for it !”

Alison smiled a little, and blushed too, and her eyes were averted.

“ You see, Aunt Gilchrist, it is not quite easy to say either yes or no, for it has all been so sudden, so unexpected. I have only spoken of it to Hugh and Flora. Hugh is greatly against it; he foresees nothing but trouble.”

“ Hugh ? What's Hugh !” the impetuous small creature exclaimed. “ Hugh understands about music and poetry and things o' that kind : what does he know of the practical affairs o' this blessed world we are livin' in ?”

“ And I imagine Flora thinks the same way, Aunt Gilchrist,” Alison said, looking up doubtfully.

“ Flora ! What right has that impertinent

young minx to have an opinion at all? Tell her from me to mind her own business, and keep to her gallivanting with those young fellows she pretends to despise all the time!”

“And—and you, Aunt Gilchrist?” Alison said, with some hesitation.

“Come here!”

She took the girl in her arms, and drew down her head and kissed her very tenderly.

“Ailie, my dear, I’ve never had a child of my own, and ye’ve been like a daughter to me. There is nothing in the world I would not do for your welfare. And maybe I was a wee bit thing too hasty, because I was delighted with the spirit o’ the lad; and—and I was glad to think o’ they folk getting a slap on the cheek; but it’s your own heart ’ye must consult, my lamb; ye must ask yourself what ye’ve the courage to face; for there may be trouble. But mind this—now mind this, Alison—if

ever you are in trouble, ye'll never want for a friend and a warm welcome as long's I'm above the ground. Now go away and think it out for yourself—and ye're a wise kind of creature, too—and ye've got decision enough when ye like: think it out for yourself; ask yourself what ye have the courage to do; and then come and tell me—to-night, or as early the morn's morning as ye like."

"Very well, aunt," Alison said, and kissed her, and was about to leave the room, when the little old lady called to her again.

"And just remember this, my dear," Aunt Gilchrist said, in a much blither fashion, "that when I promised ye a home and a warm welcome, I did not mean a Hydropathic. Not one bit! You and I will find for ourselves something snugger than a big hotel filled wi' lunatics drinking water. And if ye do get married the

morn's morning, and if by-and-by ye would take up your naitural position in Oyre House, just you tell your Captain Ludovick that his bride will be provided for on all points, for whenever he asks me I'll come and be a mother-in-law to him for as many weeks together as he likes."

Meanwhile the whole house had been put in commotion by the news that Alison was going away by the next day's steamer ; but it was now grown late ; and there was not much time left for consideration as to what should happen on the morrow. When Alison went downstairs, she found that her two cousins and Ludovick had gone out into the garden ; for there was a clear moonlight night shining all around—the pale and silvery radiance lighting up the flower-beds near at hand, the white road, the gray beach, the still bosom of the loch, and the far slopes and crags of the opposite hills that rose into an almost

cloudless sky. She joined that little group of black figures ; but she had no definite message for them. Aunt Gilchrist had left the matter to her own decision ; and she would take the intervening time to think over it. So Hugh and Flora discreetly bade Ludovick good night, and slipped into the house, leaving the two lovers to their own farewells. These were not protracted ; for Ludovick did not wish to weaken what he had said by any needless repetition ; soon Alison had rejoined her cousins, and in a little while thereafter the whole household had retired to rest.

CHAPTER III.

FOR GOOD OR ILL.

LONG into the night, and on towards the morning, she sat at the open window of her room, with this ghostly, silent, moonlit world all around her, not even the whisper of a ripple along the sea-weed margin of the beach, not a breath of wind stirring the wan gray surface of the loch. A kind of phantom world it was, and she the only living thing in it. And as she looked absently and wistfully at the sleeping water, at the silvered crags and slopes that rose afar into the starry skies, at the darker pine-woods in the north, and the still more distant and visionary hills beyond

Loch Eil, the farewell song of the Princess Deirdri would come again and again into her head, like some recurrent, ineffably sad refrain :

*“ Glen Etive, O Glen Etive,
There was raised my earliest home,
Beautiful were its woods on rising,
When the sun fell on Glen Etive !*

* * * *

*Glenorchy, O Glenorchy,
The straight glen of smooth ridges ;
No man of his age was so joyful
As my Naos in Glenorchy !*

* * * *

*Glenmassan, O Glenmassan,
Long its grass, and fair its woodland glades ;
All to ourselves was the place of our repose
On grassy Invermassan ! ”*

For she was trying to put away from her the momentous decision she would have to face before the morning. It was her leave-taking—this time a final leave-taking—on which her mind was fixed. She had been living in a fool’s paradise ; Ludovick had warned her of it at Bridge of Roy. And

here was the sharp and sudden awakening ; and a swift end to all her pleasant day-dreams, and to that joyousness that for the time being she had deemed all-sufficient.

But there were two or three other chance words of Ludovick Macdonell's that haunted her in a curious way. Her imagination would insist on carrying her forward a few years and showing her a certain thing happening to her. She did not picture herself as Mrs. James Cowan. If her friends pleaded with her, if it was put before her as her bounden duty—well, that might or might not be : it was hardly a matter of concern to her. She might be Mrs. James Cowan, or she might still be Alison Blair : she only knew that the woman she looked forward to and beheld in these coming years was a solitary woman, with hardly anything to hope for, and anxious only to secure forgetfulness of what was bygone by incessant attention to

the trivial duties surrounding her. One morning—this is what Alison saw, regarding herself as another person almost—she is in Kirk o' Shields, and busy as usual with her household cares, when a newspaper arrives. It is addressed to her by some friend in the North ; she opens it ; there is a mark that attracts her attention—then her startled eyes read the brief announcement of the marriage of Captain Ludovick Macdonell, of Oyre House, Lochaber, to Miss So-and-so, daughter of So-and-so. “ And he was once my Ludovick,” that solitary woman is saying to herself, as the newspaper drops from her hand, and her memory flies swiftly back to the time when every hour was a delight to her, when kind friends were around her, and the days shining and clear, and her lover by her side, waiting for a smile and a look, in the far solitudes of Lochaber. And perhaps that Alison,

grown callous and indifferent with added years, might dismiss the announcement of Ludovick's marriage with merely a bit of a sigh; but this Alison—here at this window, and with the knowledge that her departure was now but a question of hours—had not so schooled herself. This Alison, with her arms on the sill, and her head bent down on them, was sobbing and sobbing as if her heart would break. The other Alison might say, sadly enough, "He was once my Ludovick." This Alison kept repeating to herself, "He is my Ludovick; and to-morrow I may be looking into his eyes for the last time."

Yet ever and anon the bewildering alternative—that she should go through a hasty and informal marriage ceremony just before stepping on board the steamer—would reassert itself, and press for a decisive yes or no. Guidance she had none. Even her aunt Gilchrist, who at

first had been captivated by the mere audacity of the proposal, had grown doubtful. On the one hand was the girl's own natural dread of so sudden and serious an undertaking, on the other were her lover's eager and impetuous representations. And then, while her heart swayed this way and that, now shrinking back in fear, now grown bold through very desperation, there would come before her once more that vision of the solitary, sad-eyed woman living in Kirk o' Shields—and the newspaper with its laconic announcement—and her knowledge that now she was wholly cast aside and severed and forgotten. It was Ludovick himself who had told her that such was the way of the world. Lovers swore vows of eternal constancy when they were about to part ; but absence, the persuasions of friends, perhaps false reports—all these were powerful solvents. She knew now what she had to expect

when she went back to Kirk o' Shields : no more illusion was possible on that point. Just as likely as not, she would be sternly forbidden to hold any, even the slightest, further communication with this dangerous person who had almost drawn her away from her allegiance to the true Church. And night and day they would be pointing out to her the iniquity of one in her position thinking of marrying a Roman Catholic.

The silence of this sleeping world brought her no counsel ; the ineffable beauty of the silvered night had no message for her, unless it were to increase her sadness at the thought of the morrow's farewell. That unspeakable sadness followed her even into the land of dreams ; for when at length, worn out by these conflicting anxieties, she flung herself, half undressed, upon the bed, and eventually fell into a troubled and uncertain slumber,

behold ! she was once more the Princess Deirdri, sailing away from the shores where she had been joyous and beloved. There was a sound of lamentation ; her friends were weeping around her ; she could see the pleasant garden-land slowly receding from sight, and the dark mountains gradually hemming it in. But what was the song of mourning ?—it was no longer a farewell to Glen Etive and Glenorchy and Glenmassan—it was “Lochaber no more ! Lochaber no more !” that the very winds and the waves were sighing and calling as the boat sped away to the South. And then still stranger things began to happen. For surely this is no more the Princess Deirdri—this solitary, pale-faced woman, clothed in black, who stands all alone in a pew in the church, with the rest of the congregation pointing at her and murmuring. Then some one reads aloud—and the sound of the reading goes

echoing through the silent church—“*And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues. For her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities. Reward her even as she rewarded you, and double unto her double according to her works: in the cup which she hath filled, fill to her double. How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her: for she saith in her heart, I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow. Therefore shall her plagues come in one day, death, and mourning, and famine; and she shall be utterly burned with fire: for strong is the Lord God who judgeth her.*” She stands unmoved, and white of face; no one comes near her; the people begin to leave—turning and pointing towards her as they go, and murmuring

among themselves—until she is absolutely alone in the empty building. Darker it grows and darker. The walls seem to come closer together : why, this is a prison—a dungeon—and she is lost for ever to the outer world. And yet she is unmoved ; she is like a statue ; no prayer rises to her lips, no tears come to her eyes ; here in the darkness she remains unheeding ; the life seems to have gone from her ; she is as stone ; she makes no appeal to God or man. And then—but she knows not how long thereafter—a sound strikes her ear—a sound as of distant bells—and a wild desire possesses her to learn what is going on in the world there without. In the wall of the dungeon is a small grating ; she climbs up to it ; eagerly she clasps two of the iron bars—and lo ! a fair and sunlit landscape, with a white beach sloping down to the sea, and pleasant gardens, and dappled and far-

receding hills. Breathless she holds on to the bars ; for there is a wedding procession coming along—the bride all in white—the bridegroom gay and smiling—the bridesmaids bearing white flowers. Nearer they come—now they are passing by—and in vain, in vain she strives to make herself heard. “Ludovick ! Ludovick !—have you no word for me ?” she calls to him in her extremity of anguish ; but he cannot hear. “Ludovick ! Ludovick !—have you quite forgotten ?” she would call to him again ; but her voice cannot reach him ; the wedding-party has passed by ; her grasp relaxes ; and with a wild cry of despair she falls backward from the light, and knows no more.

It was that despairing cry that awoke her ; and when she came into the real world again, behold ! the new day was here—the new day that was to see her a bride, or a broken-hearted fugitive and

exile. Quickly she went to the window again—to assure herself that she was in no black dungeon, forsaken and alone, with the wedding-party going on in its joyful procession, leaving her unheeded in the dark. And if there was anything that could bring peace to her troubled soul, surely it was this tranquil dawn that was now declaring itself over land and sea. Soft and shadowy it was as yet, for the skies were veiled by a network of cloud ; and strangely still it was—the loch a dead calm, save where the smooth olive-green reflections of the opposite hills were broken by some wandering puff of wind into a shivering silver-gray. There was no blaze of morning splendour in this prevailing quietude ; the only shaft of sunlight that came into this mysterious half-darkened world caught a solitary distant peak—a shoulder of rose-hued granite that shone clear and wonderful above the shadowed mountains of Ardgour.

Suddenly into this silence and solitude there stepped an apparition—at least so her frightened eyes at first imagined; but the next instant she had recognized the well-known figure of Ludovick Macdonell, who was coming idly along the road, but with his eyes fixed on the Doctor's house. And the moment he caught sight of her she could see how his face lit up. He waved his hand. She forgot that she was but partly dressed; again and again she returned his salutation—for it seemed so reassuring to have him near her, after those black terrors of the night. But he lingered there, in front of the small garden: did he expect her to go down to him? Then swiftly she retreated from the window—dressed herself in a kind of way—thrust her bare feet into slippers—drew a shawl round her head—and presently, with stealthy foot-fall, was making her way down the stairs and through the sleeping

house. The heavy lock made something of a noise, but she did not heed that now; Ludovick was there, expecting her. And then the next moment she found herself in the garden—she rosy-red, and yet with joy and welcome in her eyes, he hastening to her with a look as glad as her own.

“What have you to say to me, Alison?—is it to be yes?”

He had not to wait for an answer—it was written in her upturned face: he caught her to him, and pushed back the shawl from her forehead, and kissed her again and again.

“So you are going to be brave!” he said to her.

She hid her burning face in his bosom, and murmured—

“Ludovick, I am yours—yours—yours! Tell me what is right.”

“But you are all trembling!” he exclaimed.

“I have been so frightened,” she said. “There was a terrible dream—I thought I was in a dungeon—and there was one small window—and I looked through it and saw you—you were going away to be married——”

“And there’s a true dream, anyway!” he said gaily. “Indeed I am going to be married, as soon as ever this blessed town of Fort William wakes up!”

“But why are you here already?” she asked; and she disengaged herself a little, so that they could walk up and down the small gravelled pathways between the beds of flowers, though still his arm was interlinked with hers. “What made you think of coming so early, Ludovick?”

“Oh, well,” he said evasively, “I have just been strolling about.”

“Ludovick,” she protested, “do you mean that you have never been to bed at all?”

“It was hardly worth while,” he said; and then he added, “Well, to tell you the truth, I was determined to have the earliest possible glimpse of you, and I knew you would come to the window some time. And really it was very pleasant. There has been hardly any darkness at all; the moonlight seemed to melt into the first light of the morning. I have been walking up and down in front of the gardens, and wondering whether the good people would be awfully angry if I went in and made up a bouquet of all the prettiest flowers, for the bride to carry in her hand.”

“Were you so sure, Ludovick?” she said slowly, with downcast eyes.

“I was nearly sure.”

She was silent for a second or two; then she said—but perhaps merely to hide her embarrassment—“How delicious the morning air is! Don’t you think the flowers smell more sweetly before the sun gets at

them? That is why I like to sleep with the window open; you can almost tell when the morning begins by the scent of the flowers coming in, and the birds beginning to chirp. I mean when I am living here," she said, rather sadly. "We have neither birds nor flowers in Kirk o' Shields."

"I suppose not," he said lightly—for he would not allow her to fall into any despondent mood on her wedding-morning. "But you are not going to live always in Kirk o' Shields. By the way, Alison," he said, in a sort of incidental fashion, "don't you think Oyre House looks very bare outside? I can't see why the gardener shouldn't get some flowering plants trained up the walls. I suppose you don't know whether honeysuckle or a tree-fuchsia would grow most quickly?"

"No, Ludovick, I'm sure I don't know," she said.

“The tree-fuchsia is certainly a beautiful thing,” he continued, as they were idly and happily walking together, with interlinked arms, between those beds of blossoms, “when you can get it to grow properly. I have seen the whole side of a house covered with it—and the rich crimson bells go so well with the dark-green leaves. But the honeysuckle has the great advantage of scent. Which would you like to have round your window?”

“I?” she said, looking up at this abrupt question.

“Yes; I was just thinking,” he said, “that I must try and do something to make Oyre look less forlorn; and I was wondering whether honeysuckle or fuchsias would be best.”

“I should think most people would say honeysuckle,” Alison made answer modestly; and then she said, “Now I must go in, Ludovick.”

“No, not yet,” he pleaded. “We have got the whole world to ourselves; there is no one thinking of stirring yet. I want you to tell me——” (For a moment he could not say what he wanted her to tell him; then he hit upon an excuse for delaying her.) “I want you to tell me what are your favourite flowers for planting out—beds like these, you see—tell me your favourite colours in flowers. You know, I don’t think our man at Oyre has much taste—or perhaps it’s direction he wants; my father and myself never think of interfering. Aren’t you very fond of white moss-roses, Alison? I fancy they are not so common as they used to be, but we’ve got some bushes—oh yes, we’ve got some——”

“But I must go in, Ludovick! The fact is,” she said, by way of laughing excuse, “the pebbles are hurting my feet—my slippers are so thin.”

“Then come and stand on the door-step,” said he.

“But the servants will be about directly.”

“Oh no, not at all. You have no idea how early it is yet. Why, don’t they say it is unlucky for lovers to meet on their wedding-day before the ceremony takes place? But then, you see, this isn’t the wedding-day yet; this belongs to the night-time; it isn’t day at all yet.”

“It looks very like it, Ludovick,” said she—for now there were stray shafts of sunlight striking on the higher crests of the opposite hills; and the yachts, that had been black as jet on the lilac-gray water, had now assumed their ordinary colour, their riding-lights being no longer distinguishable.

But despite the ever widening and brightening dawn, their leave-taking was a long and lingering one; and even when she had crept silently back to her own

room she found he was still in the garden below, waiting for a last look or wave of the hand. So from a jug of flowers that stood on the small table beside her she took a rose and flung it to him, and kissed her finger-tips therewith ; then she noiselessly shut the window, so that none in the house should hear. But she did not go back to bed again—there was too much to think of on this eventful morning.

Eventful, indeed ! For no sooner had Alison's decision become known throughout the household than there was very considerable perturbation, not to say dismay—the elder Munroes having to be told, and the Doctor taking no pains to conceal his strong disapproval of so mad a project.

“Of course, you are quite old enough to judge for yourself, Alison,” he said at the breakfast-table, when the servant had left the room, “and whatever you do will be quite legal and proper and correct ; but

I wish it had not been done from this house. We have had charge of you ; your father will put the blame on us. And I for one cannot but think that so sudden and unconsidered a step may lead you into difficulties that you don't anticipate just now—— ”

“ Duncan,” his wife interposed, with a quiet smile, “ surely you have not forgotten that you wanted me to do exactly the same thing when we were sweethearts ? ”

“ There's a great difference,” he said quickly and uneasily (for the father of a family does not like to have his romantic exploits of past days discussed at his own breakfast-table). “ There's a great difference between a medical student without any certain prospects and the young laird of Oyre. Your family were quite right in their opposition—I may say that now ; but where can the objection be to young Macdonell—what is the use of this hurry

—what is the need of rushing into a hasty marriage——?”

“Duncan, my man,” interposed Aunt Gilchrist, with but scant courtesy towards her brother, “ye’re just havering. There’s plenty of objection to young Macdonell among they folk in Kirk o’ Shields; and if Alison goes back there without some such bond, I doubt whether she will ever see him again. Oh, I’m not responsible for the marriage—ye needna think that! I left it to herself—I left it to herself to say whether she had courage enough; but now that my bit lady has plucked up heart, do ye think I’m going to desert her? Not I! That’s not liké me, I tell ye! I’ll stand by your side, Ailie, my dear; and I’ve got something to hint to your Captain Ludovick when I get a quiet word wi’ him that’ll no disappoint him, I reckon.”

“Responsible or no responsible, Jane,”

said the Doctor, who seemed extremely uncomfortable about this affair, "you are taking act and part in it. And if it were an ordinary marriage, with proper notice given to everybody—but an irregular marriage——"

"Who says it is an irregular marriage?" demanded the little dame fiercely.

"They are going to be married by declaration and a warrant of the sheriff-substitute—isn't that the proposal?" her brother said.

"What then?"

"But that *is* an irregular marriage," he insisted. "You will find it will have to be so described in the Register."

Then Aunt Gilchrist laughed aloud in her scorn.

"Well, I declare!" she cried. "You do exactly as the law bids ye, and then the law itself tells ye it is irregular! Dod, man, Duncan, the lawyers maun be as daft

as the doctors! Never mind, it's a marriage all the same; and if I'm to be at the wedding, I'm going to make myself as splendid as splendid can be, and Alison is coming to help me. And mind," said this imperious small person, as she was leading her niece away with her towards the door, "mind, as this is Alison's wedding-day, I'm not going to tramp backward and forward through the streets of Fort William. One of you, Hugh or Flora, you'll just step along to Mr. Carmichael, and say I want the waggonette sent here instanter, and the best pair o' horses in the stable. And if the man has a new suit o' livery, then on wi't at once! Come away, Alison; it's 'hey the bonny, ho the bonny, hey the bonny breast-knots!' and if ye've got no special finery for the wedding, see if I dinna make that up to ye before long—my word for it!"

And then again, when the little silver-

haired, fresh-complexioned, bright-eyed woman had got her niece into her own room, she placed her at arm's-length before her and regarded her.

"They've no frightened ye, Ailie, my dear?"

"No, aunt, not in the least," Alison answered, quite simply.

"There's self-possession for ye! there's coolness!—there's my bit lady, that would face a regiment of cavalry when her mind's made up!" Aunt Gilchrist said, quite proudly. "That brother o' mine—don't you heed him, Alison! They professional folk are just that timid about what the neighbours may say—they're a' living in glass houses—and they darena call their soul their own. But I thought he might frighten you."

"Well, aunt, this is how it is," Alison made answer. "I was very much troubled and very anxious at first, when I had to

consider this—this proposal ; but since I have given my promise to Ludovick, it is of no consequence what any one may say—that is all.”

“ Since you’ve given your promise to Ludovick !—and when was that, I wonder ? ”

“ This morning.”

“ This morning ? ”

“ He was in the garden, aunt : I went down and saw him.”

“ They young folk ! they young folk ! ” exclaimed Aunt Gilchrist, shaking her head mournfully ; but she was not deeply displeased, and forthwith she went to her chest of drawers. “ Well, Alison, I’ll show ye the gown I’m going to wear ; and if ye dinna say it’s fit for a wedding, I’ll call ye an ungrateful hussy.”

Indeed, one might have thought it was Aunt Gilchrist herself who was about to be married, from the importance she assumed on this momentous morning. Of course

there was a vast amount of hurrying, for the time was short ; and yet in the midst of it all Aunt Gilchrist found an opportunity of calming the consciences of the elder Munroes, who were not a little alarmed by what was going on. She pointed out to them that they need not take any part whatsoever in this project, or be in any way responsible for it. What would happen, would happen after Alison had left their house. Her luggage was quite ready ; let the lad John convey it down to the quay. Alison would say good-bye to the Doctor and Mrs. Munro at their own door ; and if she chose to go through a marriage ceremony with anybody—no matter whom—between that leave-taking and her departure by the steamer, why, that was her own affair, and they need not be supposed to know.

When Ludovick Macdonell came along, a few minutes thereafter, Flora's quick eye

perceived that he did not wear his usual happy and careless audacity of manner ; he seemed anxious about Alison somehow ; he kept looking at her from time to time—though, to be sure, she appeared perfectly calm and self-possessed. He had no opportunity of speaking to her alone until they were going down through the garden to the waggonette, and even then it was only a word.

“Alison,” he said, in a low voice, “am I asking too much ?”

“No, Ludovick,” she answered simply, and with frank eyes upturned to his.

And indeed there was nothing very exacting or imposing or terrifying about this brief ceremony. When they drove along to the solicitor's office, that functionary drew out a declaration of marriage from particulars he had already received from Captain Ludovick. The two contracting parties signed it—Alison's hand

just trembling a little ; then two witnesses had to sign, of whom Aunt Gilchrist boldly claimed to be the first. The bridegroom looked doubtfully at Hugh.

“ Perhaps you would rather have nothing to do with it, Hugh ? ” said he.

“ Oh, I’m going to stand by you, Ludovick,” the younger man answered promptly, and he took the pen from Aunt Gilchrist and affixed his name.

The next part of the ceremony was equally brief and simple. Armed with this important document they drove along to the big brown-stone building in which the sheriff’s court is held ; there they sought out the sheriff-substitute in his chambers. That worthy gentleman read over the declaration, signed it, and handed it back to Captain Ludovick, whom, by the way, he chanced to know slightly ; and the next minute, when they were out in the open air again, Alison Blair was no

longer Alison Blair, but Alison Macdonell, whatever the change might bring to her in the coming years.

“And is it really all over, Ludovick?” Flora cried, clinging on to Alison’s arm, and looking a little bit awe-stricken as well as amused; for there was something uncanny about this swift, simple, informal transaction that had in a few minutes so completely transformed the lives of two human beings.

“Well,” said the bridegroom doubtfully, as he pulled out his watch, “there might be time to go to the registrar and get a copy of the entry, if Alison would like to take it with her.”

“Ludovick,” said Hugh, who was a long-sighted lad, “the steamer has left Corpach.”

“Then we’ll run no risks,” Macdonell said forthwith. “I’ll go to the registrar when I come back in the afternoon—there

is no hurry ; and we can walk down to the quay now, unless Mrs. Gilchrist would rather drive."

"Oh, I'll go with ye. Periphery will let me go that short way," Aunt Gilchrist responded. "But the waggonette must wait for me. I'm not going home until I see my bit lady fairly started for the South."

And now, as the red-funnelled steamer slows in and stops, picks up its passengers and cargo, and sets forth on its voyage again—and when the last farewells have been waved to the proud little dame still standing at the end of the quay—behold ! this is no sad-eyed Princess Deirdri sailing away southward, surrounded by weeping companions. The steeled composure of the morning is no longer necessary ; the ordeal is over ; now she is roseate and happy and glad, as becomes a bride ; and her cousins are as kind to her as they can be, though still they must tease her, and

pay mock homage to her new estate. As for Captain Ludovick, he holds somewhat aloof; he is her husband, but does not press any claim on her attention; he allows the cousins to monopolize her; he appears indifferent—has he not the part of a husband to play? And is not the day a fair day and fit for a bride? The farther and farther south they go the skies get brighter and brighter, until here, close at hand, along the Appin shore, the sun is shining brilliantly on the sandy bays, on the rocks and crags half covered with ivy, and on the patches of dark-green fir and light-green ash; while away to the west, beyond the glassy plain of the sea, the far hills of Morven and Kingairloch have become of a faint rose-gray, with every scaur and corrie traced in shadows of purest azure. The throb of the paddle-wheels no longer bids her say a last farewell to Lochaber; kind friends are close and near to her; her

lover—her husband—is but a yard or two away, an outstanding guard, as it were ; and if there were no marriage-bells rung for her in Fort William, they are ringing now in her heart.

Ludovick comes forward.

“ I say, Flora,” he begins, “ don’t you think it is rather shabby of me to let Alison go back alone ? Don’t you think I should go with her, to see her properly established ? ”

Alison looks up with a smile.

“ Well, Ludovick,” she says, “ I don’t know what may happen to me ; perhaps something not very pleasant ; but I know if you were to go with me, it would be twenty times worse. You talk about your discretion : why, you haven’t got any at all ! No, you must come back in this steamer with Hugh and Flora ; I don’t want any one to see you with me in the railway-train or anywhere else ; that would

only make matters worse ; and the truth is, Ludovick, perhaps—perhaps it may be better for me not to tell them what has happened—not for a little while, anyway, until I see a good chance.”

“ Then,” said he, with an air of surprise, “ do you want me to address my letters to Miss Alison Blair?—is that what I’m to call you ? ”

She looked down.

“ Oh yes, why not ? ” she said.

“ Oh, very well,” he made answer, cheerfully enough ; “ it is of little consequence—only that would hardly be my way—I would tell them straight off, and let them make what they can of it. But just as you like. You see, Flora, I’m going to be a very obedient husband—at first. We’ll have to lead her into slavery by gentle degrees. We’ll have the rack and the thumb-screw produced later on.”

None the less was it somewhat hard

that the parting between husband and wife should take place in view of the onlookers in Oban railway-station. The train was pretty full ; the best he could do for her was to get her a seat in a compartment in which an elderly lady and her three fair, large, and bright-haired daughters were already installed ; therefore, what he had to say to her had to be spoken in parables.

“Remember, Alison”—these were his last words to her as the train was beginning to move out of the station—“remember, you will have to be at Oyre long before the honeysuckle has had time to grow up to the window.”

Her eyes were fixed on his : she knew what he meant.

“I am not so sure about that, Ludovick,” she answered ; but she smiled bravely as long as he was in sight ; and even kissed her hand to him again and again, despite the presence of these strangers ; and when

at last the train tore her away from him, and from the cousins who had been so kind to her, the tears that dimmed her eyes were not such tears of wretchedness after all.

CHAPTER IV.

A SUMMONS.

ONE afternoon Flora was in the garden, busily engaged in snipping dead roses off the rose-bushes, when her brother Hugh came up from the shore. He had his yellow oil-skins over his arm, for it had been wet in the morning, though now the sun was hot on the flower-beds and the little gravelled paths.

“Look here,” said he gloomily, “we must get rid of that fellow Johnny. He’s growing worse and worse. He has been so encouraged, and so often forgiven, that he is now perfectly reckless, and the end of it will be his finding himself in Inverness

jail. It's no use. He doesn't believe you when you threaten him."

"Why, what has he been doing now?" said Flora, looking up.

"There it is!" her brother exclaimed in disgust. "At once you are ready to laugh! That is the way you encourage him—and do you think he doesn't understand? Well, I don't see the fun of it myself. I don't want to be had up on a charge of manslaughter."

"What is it now?" she repeated.

"Oh, nothing!" he said, "only a little playful trick! When I went out in the lug-sail boat I put him up at the bow to keep a look-out—I thought it would just suit his laziness. Well, nothing happened till we were near to Corpach, when all of a sudden I heard a frightful yell right in front of me, and when I jammed down the helm I found myself just shaving the edge of a canoe—some tourist, I suppose, out

from Banavie. It was a most extraordinary thing that I did not cut the boat clean in two—and I think the man in it was so frightened he hadn't a single curse to fling after me. Then as for your friend John—oh, it was a splendid thing for him!—he was grinning from ear to ear like a dead sunfish. When I asked the young devil why he had not called out, though I was more like hitting him over the head with the boat-hook, he only said, 'Cosh, you would have smashed him fine! I would have liked to see a big fat man like that flottin' in the watter!'"

Flora fairly shrieked and shrieked again with laughter, which only made her brother the more angry.

"Oh, you think that a joke, do you?" he said. "Do you know what manslaughter is? Well, the sooner he goes back to his father's croft the better; and a pretty handful the old man will have of

him. I know the way he goes on at home. He'll go in of an evening, and say to his father, 'Get up out of that chair now; I'm the only one that has been at work all day, and I'm tired.' And it's mostly owing to you, Flora, that he thinks himself such a funny creature, and prides himself on every piece of devilment he can think of. Alison tried to keep some kind of control over him, though it wasn't much. He's afraid of Ludovick, certainly, but Ludovick can't be here always."

"Talk of the—ahem!" said Flora, who was facing the road. "Here he is."

Hugh turned, and there, sure enough, was Ludovick Macdonell, just entering by the gate. But he did not send them a loud and hearty greeting, as was his wont. When he came up the pathway, they could see that his face was unusually grave, and his very first words, addressed to Flora, were of an astounding character.

“Have you heard anything of Alison?” said he.

“Of Alison?” she repeated, quite taken aback. “No—we have not heard—and I was wondering she did not send us a line—but you—of course, you——”

“I declare to you I haven’t heard a single word from her since she left!” he exclaimed. “Day after day, day after day, I have waited, making certain that the next morning would bring me a letter, and I have written four or five times to her; not a single word of reply! And you have heard nothing either?”

“Not anything!” said Flora, who was quite bewildered. “Ludovick—you—you don’t mean to say she has never written to you since she went back to Kirk o’ Shields?”

“I have not heard from her in any way whatsoever!” he answered. “She might be dead for anything I know. What can

be the meaning of it? I confess that I did not write for a day or two after she left—I did not want to be too pressing but even if she were offended with me, I made sure you would have heard from her.”

“Don’t think such things of Alison!” Flora said at once. “She is not offended. It is more serious than that.”

He started slightly, and a curious look came suddenly over his face.

“Perhaps,” said he, slowly, “it is against her will—she may not be allowed.”

Hugh noticed that look.

“I say, Ludovick,” he interposed, “it may be so; but you won’t mend matters by doing anything in anger.”

“Oh, anger or no anger!” the young man retorted impatiently—with his face grown quite pale and set hard, for he appeared to be contemplating many and distant things.

"Come into the house, Ludovick," Flora said, "and let's talk it over."

"No," he answered. "No. This will do very well. You are quite right, Flora; Alison can't be offended. It's something else—undoubtedly." He seemed hardly to know what he was saying, so intently was his mind fixed upon those distant possibilities; and a slight inflation of the nostril was the only outward sign of the war of self-control going on within. "Of course there is but the one thing—I must go and see her at once—I must go and see how she is being treated——"

Flora put her hand on his arm.

"Don't do anything rash, Ludovick—you might make matters worse——"

"Then I suppose I have not the right to see her—is that it?" he said wrathfully (but indeed he did not mean to quarrel with this kind-hearted friend: the young man was out of his senses with a quick

strife of pity and indignation and anger : he was guessing at all manner of things as happening to Alison in that hateful place far away).

“Look here, Ludovick,” Hugh interposed, in a gentle fashion, “consider how difficult Alison’s position must be. She is between father and husband—most likely she doesn’t know which to obey——”

“Obey !” he exclaimed. “I don’t want her to obey anything or anybody ! I want her to have the freedom that every one else in this kingdom has. Is it obeying that she may not write a line to say she is alive ? Well, I’ll have an end of that kind of obeying—and soon !”

“Ludovick, you don’t know in the least what has happened,” Hugh said ; “and if you went to find out, you would be like a bull in a china shop, and make endless mischief. But there are two simple ways of getting to know, and you may take

which you please. Flora can write to Agnes. If there's any objection to Alison writing to you, there can be none to Agnes writing to her cousin, surely. On the other hand, if you like, I will go and see what it all means. Mind, I never liked this affair from the first; but now it's done, I'll stand by you and Alison; and I'll do anything you want me to do. I can go down by to-morrow morning's steamer—and by the afternoon you'll have a telegram."

"Well, there's some reason in that," Macdonell said, after some hesitation, and holding his breath a little. "But—but why should I ask for help? Why should I keep away like a coward? And—and why should I put the responsibility on to anybody else's shoulders?"

"Ludovick, what are you talking about!" Flora cried. "I thought we were friends! But if you'll take my advice, you won't let

Hugh go. His other way is the better way. Let me write to Agnes. I think I can be more diplomatic than either of you. I think I can make it easy for Agnes to tell us everything we want to know, without stirring up strife ; and surely I may say that mother has been surprised to have heard nothing about Alison ? Come into the house, Ludovick, and I'll scribble out something like what I mean to say, and you can tell me what you think of it."

It was Flora's suggestion that was adopted, after all ; and they went into the house, where she set about the composition of an exceedingly skilful letter—simple and ordinary in outward appearance, and merely as from one cousin to another ; and then, somewhat more pacified, but with his hot suspicions in nowise banished, Ludovick Macdonell went away back to Oyre, and so the matter rested for the moment.

But they had not to wait for any

response to these discreet inquiries: all the information—and much more than they could have dreamed of—came the very next afternoon, and to Aunt Gilchrist. Aunt Gilchrist, as it chanced, had gone out for a little walk—a very little walk, for Periphery was not wholly dislodged, and had to be treated with some consideration; and the postman, coming along, and knowing her well enough, stopped and gave her the letter he had for her. She was not far from the garden-gate, yet she paused for a second when she recognized the handwriting on the envelope. She too had been wondering why no news had come from Alison. And here, perhaps, was the explanation.

She opened the letter, which appeared to consist of an unusual number of sheets, and was proceeding to glance over these, as she walked along, when suddenly she halted in the middle of the roadway, and

stood stock-still there, while she deliberately went back to the first page and began reading every line ; for this was what Mrs. Cowan of Corbieslaw, writing from Kirk o' Shields, had to say :—

“ DEAR MADAM,

“ I hope you will pardon my addressing you, but I am sure you have still an affectionate spot in your heart towards your misguided niece, that has got herself into such sore trouble, from the which I hope with the Lord's blessing and mercy she may be soon released, to become again a source of *thankfulness* and *cherishing* to her many friends, including yourself, dear madam. The deceitful and *wicked* young man that induced her to forget the faith of her fathers and the way of her bringing up, and to go through a *mock* marriage with a Roman Catholic, has no doubt concealed his ongoings from you,

dear Mrs. Gilchrist ; but his cruel designs have been frustrated, thanks to an all-wise and ever-watchful Providence ; and his own conscience will do the rest, so far as he is concerned. And as for our poor dear Alison, though how she could be led into such a thing, having yourself to go to, and being in such a position with her expectations from her aunt's kindness of thought and *generosity* towards her, I cannot imagine ; but now I am thankful to say she is penitent and biddable, and will, I heartily hope and believe, do what she can to make reparation, and stand well again in her aunt's good favour. For well she knows now that the marriage she was entrapped into, by such *wiles* as can be imagined, is not a marriage—it is a godless ceremony that the young man's Church, if that is to be called a Church that would destroy us soul and body, even that Church would scorn to acknowledge it, which is

the more to be desired that now Alison can hold herself free from any bond, as I have to tell her again and again, and bound only by the natural obedience to her father, as far as this world below is concerned, to do all things, as he commands and ordains, under guidance of our heavenly Father, who has put this trust in his hands. And now I am glad to inform you, dear and honoured madam, that her heart, that at first was *hard* as the *nether millstone*, has softened at last ; and no wonder, for when her father, in his own pulpit, before the whole congregation, had to lift up his voice and wrestle with the Lord in prayer, and supplicate that his own daughter should be brought to know how she had wandered into the paths of transgression and forsaken the home and the teaching of her youth, and become a stumbling-block to the righteous, and a shame to those of her own age that had received the Sacra-

ment with her, it was no wonder, and I rejoiced to see it, that the tears were running down her half-hidden face in token of her penitence and contrition for the sin she had done——”

And the tears were running down Aunt Gilchrist's face too; but they were not tears of pity and sympathy at all; they were tears of maddened and impotent rage.

“If I was a man!—if I was a man!” she muttered to herself, with clinched teeth; and she could not read any more of the letter because of her streaming eyes; she walked quickly on to the gate, and up the pathway, and into the house, dashing Flora unceremoniously aside when the wondering girl asked her what was the matter. And even in her own room she did not return to the letter. She kept marching up and down, wringing her hands in a kind of frenzy, and uttering brief exclamations from time to time.

“My lamb!—my lamb! My bairn—to be treated like that!—and not one near to comfort her!”

And then, in the very uselessness and helplessness of her indignation she sank into a seat and burst into a fit of passionate weeping—sobbing like a schoolgirl, with her handkerchief over her eyes. When she came out of that fit she was a great deal calmer, but there was a look about her face, especially about her lips, that Mrs. Cowan of Corbieslaw would not have greeted with any degree of welcome.

“And now, dear madam,” the letter continued, “I would like to tell you what we have done as best beseeming your niece’s interests, temporal and eternal, and as she is now convinced that the marriage she was so shamefully intrigued into would not be recognized by the Romans themselves, and that she is therefore not a wife, as the young man confesses himself,

or why does he address his letters to *Miss Alison Blair*, though it is of little consequence, as she has been forbidden to answer them ; but as I was saying, she is now, according to both the laws of God and man, under the government and direction of her father, who has thought fit to put some of his authority on to my shoulders, in *all kindness*, I would say, and I will take charge of her until this unhappy affair has been forgotten. It will comfort you, dear madam, to know that the wicked contract she was entrapped into will in time cease to have any power over her, for the law, as I have it on the *best authority*, leaves a merciful way of escape for them that have been so beguiled ; and in the mean time we have but to see that she is kept away from the designs and machinations of that godless young man. She has placed herself in our hands, being sincerely penitent for the shame she has

brought on a Christian household; and though there will be no harshness——”

“Harshness!” said Aunt Gilchrist, with burning eyes. “My woman, if I was within reach of your ill-faured face!”

“—she has consented to do whatever she is bid, and our first step will be to remove her from any risk of further *contamination*. He will soon stop writing when he finds his letters not answered; and if he seeks her in her own home, or elsewhere, he will seek in vain. So, dear Mrs. Gilchrist, we have reason to rejoice in all proper humility and humble uplifting of a thankful heart that the sheep has returned to the fold, and that the Good Shepherd has not been robbed of one of His lambs.

“Just one word more, dear madam, if I may make so bold, for I am greatly concerned about the welfare of this poor, misguided young lady, and I would presume

to hope that your *generous intentions* with regard to her *worldly* interests will not be interfered with by what has happened. The *kindness* of her *aunt* would be an additional inducement for her to persevere in the laudable course she has now entered upon ; and I am sure, dear madam, that at no time could you have reconciled it with your *conscience* and your *duty* to allow any portion of your earthly possessions to come under the control of a Roman Catholic, to pay tribute to Antichrist, and help to fatten the *priests* and the *Pope*, that are the enemies of the Word and of them that dwell in Zion—— ”

“ Oh, this woman—this woman sickens me ! ” Aunt Gilchrist cried furiously, and she went to the bell-rope and pulled it again and again.

A Highland maid-servant appeared, with eyes large, staring, and amazed.

“ Bella, there’s a good lass, ye’ll go

directly and get that lad John, and send him along to Carmichael's, and he's to get a powny there and gallop as hard's he can out to Oyre House, and tell Captain Macdonell that he's to come and see me just at once. Do ye understand, now ?—and John is not to lose a moment—not a moment !”

“ Oh yes, mem,” said the maid, smiling. “ Johnny will go fast enough when it uss a powny he hass to ride.”

But she had not got down the stair when this impetuous small creature called her back.

“ No, Bella, that'll no do: I'm going myself to Oyre. Send to Carmichael and say I want the waggonette at once—just at once. And, Bella, there's a good lassie, couldna ye run along yourself ?—I'm no sure o' that idling fellow John.”

“ Oh yes, mem,” the good-natured Highland girl said. “ I will run along jist this moment.”

Hugh, who was deep in his books at the drawing-room window, and Flora, who was busy with her shears in the garden, were considerably astonished to find the waggonette coming along at this unusual hour, and still further perplexed when they saw Aunt Gilchrist drive off alone. But Aunt Gilchrist had many things to think of; and she did not wish to be interrupted by either of these young people. As she drove away on this pleasant afternoon, she took out Mrs. Cowan's letter again, and read it carefully over, in what she fondly fancied was cold blood. She even persuaded herself that she could admire the woman's cleverness in assuming that of course Aunt Gilchrist must be opposed to her niece's committing such a crime as marriage with a Roman Catholic. Then her references to Aunt Gilchrist's generous intentions, and certain concluding words about the possibility of brighter prospects

being in store for Alison, were no doubt introduced in the interests of the probationer, the doting mother still in hopes of seeing her offspring suitably provided with a wife and a moderate fortune.

When Aunt Gilchrist drove up to Oyre House, she perceived that Ludovick was at home, for he was standing at the door of a small conservatory, talking to the gardener, who was within. Apparently he had been amusing himself by mowing the tennis-lawn, for there was the lawn-mower standing idle, while his jacket lay on the grass a little distance off. The moment he saw who this was who had arrived, he came quickly along, picked up his jacket and put it on, and presently was at the steps of the waggonette.

“How do you do, Aunt Gilchrist?” (for so he presumed to call her now). “I suppose you have some news?”

“Oh yes, I have some news. Ye need

not open the door, thenk ye; I'm not coming down. Yes, I've got some news, Captain Ludovick. I've got a letter; and I'm afraid it will put ye into a very violent passion; and that'll not do—that'll not do at all. Ye'll just have to keep yourself quite calm and collected," continued this eminently cool-headed, discreet, and diplomatic person, "and we'll devise something, you and me, that may serve our turn. But cautious, cautious, ye see. We'll have to watch."

She handed him the letter. The young man began to read it, but presently he appeared quite stupefied and bewildered.

"Why, the woman's out of her senses!" he exclaimed. "Does she think there is no law in the land?"

Aunt Gilchrist knew there was worse to come: she waited that he might finish the reading.

"Well, Captain Ludovick," said she,

rather breathlessly, "what—what do you think of doing?"

"Oh, I'm going straight through to Kirk o' Shields!" said he, still regarding the letter.

"Yes?" she said, with her bosom beginning to heave a little. "Yes?—I—I thought you would say that. There's—there's a man wanted to interfere. You'll answer a letter like that in person—and—and soon. I'm afraid they have been rather heavy-handed wi'—wi' my bit lady——" She made an effort to smile; but it was rather a tremulous smile; and there was a surging passion at her heart that threatened to upset all her studied self-command. "Yes, I'm afraid they have been rather heavy-handed with Alison, before they could break down her spirit and courage. Captain—Macdonell—ye're not going to see your young wife treated like that?"

“No,” said he, slowly, and with darkened brows, “I don’t think I am going to stand by and look on, if that is what you mean. It is about time for me to be there, I think.”

Aunt Gilchrist made a desperate endeavour to suppress the emotion that was nearly getting the better of her; and then she said, with apparent quietude, though her lips were still pale and trembling—

“Yes, I thought ye would be for going to Kirk o’ Shields; and—and I’ll just wait for you in the waggonette, until ye’ve got some things put in your bag; and if ye come in to Fort William with me now, then ye’ll catch the early steamer in the morning.”

“That’s very kind of you,” he said; and he was going away absently and thoughtfully, with his head bent down, when he recollected that he ought again to ask Aunt Gilchrist to step indoors for a moment or two.

“No, thank ye, no, thank ye,” she made answer; “there’s no great hurry, but I feel as if there was; and I’m better in the outside air. The truth is, Captain Ludovick, I’ve been just a little thing upset by this woman’s letter—and—and I’m well content now to leave it all in your hands. Ay, ay, I’m thinking there’ll be a different story to tell when you get to Kirk o’ Shields!”

“I shan’t keep you waiting three minutes, Aunt Gilchrist,” said he, as he went off to put the few things together he might want.

And hardly had he gone when out there came the old laird of Oyre himself, followed by a maid-servant carrying a tray, on which was a small basket filled with fancy biscuits, and also a couple of decanters and a wine-glass.

“Indeed this is a flying feesit,” said the white-haired old gentleman, whose shaggy eyebrows did not in any way interfere with the grave gentleness of his expression,

and whose curiously suave and modulated speech had sounded so pleasant in Alison's ears; "and if you will not come into the house, perhaps you will take a little refreshment?" He himself handed up the biscuits to her. "And may I gif you a little claret, or a little wheeskey?"

"Well, sir," said Aunt Gilchrist (who put aside for the moment her hot indignation, and who was quite touched by the extreme courtesy of the old laird's demeanour), "in the Highlands I'm sure there's nothing wholesomer than a little drop o' whiskey."

"Indeed, now, that is ferry true, and my own opinion," Mr. Macdonell said, as he filled the glass and put it on the splash-board of the waggonette; "and I hef been all over the world in my younger days. I do not think there is anything better than a little wheeskey, when it is good wheeskey. And you hef heard now

of the prank that this scapegrace son of mine has played ? ”

“ Y—yes,” said Aunt Gilchrist, rather nervously.

But the old laird did not seem vexed.

“ I could weesh it had been different,” said he, with much good-nature ; “ but these foolish young people hef their own ways of looking at theengs ; and I dare say it will be all right when the young bride comes to live at Oyre. And if you are seeing her, you will tell her that she will not find me in the way—oh no, if I am in the way, I will just take a small cottage, where there is a little feeshing, which is an old man’s amusement, and the young people will hef the whole house to themselves.”

“ Indeed, sir,” said Aunt Gilchrist, valiantly, “ ye’re just making the very proposal that would prevent Alison ever coming near the place—depend on that, sir, depend on that.”

Old Mr. Macdonell seemed highly pleased.

“Well, now,” said he, with a smile, “perhaps we might live in the one house after all ; for I do not think I hef a ferry bad temper—for a Highlander, that is to say ; and if one were to judge of the young lady’s disposition by her face, then I would not call her a quarrelsome pers-son.”

“She’s just too gentle !” Aunt Gilchrist exclaimed, with a bit of a sob (for she had been very near to crying when she was making her appeal to Captain Ludovick). “And she’s fallen into ill hands—ill hands. The sooner your son takes away his young wife from among they folk the better. And I’m real glad, sir, to hear ye speak so kindly about Alison ; and if she were here this moment she would show her gratitude to ye, I’m sure o’ that, for she’s a warm-hearted, affectionate bit crayture, despite the prim ways o’ her bringing up, and her

pride and dignity, that would make ye think she was the Queen o' Sheba sometimes."

"When she does come here," the old laird said, in his grave and gentle way, "there's not any one will gif her a more hearty welcome than myself; and I hope you will take that as a message to your niece—that is to be my daughter as well—I hope you will take that message to her if you should be seeing her."

Here Ludovick made his appearance, pitched his travelling-bag up beside the driver, and stepped into the waggonette; the horses sprung forward; the white-haired old Highlander raised his glengarry, and went off into the house again; and Aunt Gilchrist and her companion found themselves with this long drive before them during which they could discuss what forthwith was to be done.

But on one point Aunt Gilchrist was

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very nearly becoming angry with the young man. She could not understand the curious leniency, or perhaps it was rather the contemptuous indifference, with which he seemed to regard Mrs. Cowan of Corbieslaw.

"She is merely a stupid and ignorant person," said he.

"She's a cunning she-devil," Aunt Gilchrist exclaimed vindictively; "a bold, impudent, brazen-faced woman!"

"I dare say she thinks she is acting quite properly, and for the best interests of everybody concerned—and especially with regard to the interests of her son, for very good people sometimes give way to a little natural bias. But I wonder," he continued, "what she means by saying that the law offers some way of escape to any one in Alison's position? I suppose she has got hold of some vulgar superstition—there are plenty such, and particularly

with regard to marriage. However, I don't think there will be much trouble about that. If it comes to be a question of claiming authority—well, I have in my pocket at this moment a little document that I think will settle that point. Would you like to see it, Aunt Gilchrist?"

"Yes, I should," said Aunt Gilchrist, getting out her gold-rimmed glasses.

But this was hardly a small document that he drew from his pocket—this oblong sheet of lilac-hued paper, with its printed matter resplendent in green ink, and with a number of hand-written entries in its parallel columns. Aunt Gilchrist, having fixed her eye-glasses, got hold of this formidable document; and by the aid of the after-glow that was shining all around them, and that made those green-printed lines look strange, she easily mastered its contents. It was entitled "*Extract of an Entry in a Register of Marriages kept in*

the undermentioned Parish, or District, in terms of 17° and 18° Victoriæ, Cap. 80. §§ 56 and 58 ;" and then in its successive columns were all the details of the marriage between Ludovick Macdonell, bachelor, of Oyre House, Lochaber, and Alison Blair, spinster, of 5, East Street, Kirk o' Shields. Their respective ages were given ; the names of father and mother on each side ; the date of the sheriff-substitute's warrant ; and finally the signature of the registrar. Aunt Gilchrist found herself figuring there, along with Hugh Munro, as a witness of the marriage : in short, this paper contained a complete history of the ceremony, and an exhibition of the forms that had been gone through, as by law ordained.

Aunt Gilchrist laughed, and said—

" I'm thinking they'll discover it's rather difficult to get over that !" But then her eyes grew anxious again. " And, oh, Captain Ludovick, ye'll lose no time in

finding out poor Alison, and protecting her, and comforting her! It just breaks my heart to think what she must have been suffering—and alone, too—quite alone, ye may say, with nobody to take her part——”

“As soon as I can get hold of Alison herself it will be all right, Aunt Gilchrist,” said he. “I can guess pretty clearly what they’ve been about. They have told her lies about her not being married; and they have brought the reproach of the congregation to bear on her, and all kinds of fanatical terrorisms; then she had no one to appeal to; no doubt they threatened her with pains and penalties if she even wrote a letter. I don’t suppose they have locked her up: this is the nineteenth century—though in some things it hardly seems to be the nineteenth century in Kirk o’ Shields; but anyhow, if they have locked her up, you may trust me to find

the key. And there's another thing, Aunt Gilchrist: when we reach Fort William, I don't think I'll go along to the Munroes'; I will stay at the hotel, and be off by the first steamer in the morning. The fact is, it would be no use having this matter discussed by the whole family. You know, both Doctor and Mrs. Munro were against the marriage; and although they are too good-natured to say 'I told you so,' still I suppose they would naturally exaggerate this trouble that has come along. I shall have to find out about it first for myself; but you may tell Hugh that if I want him to come and help me, I will telegraph to him."

So the little old dame—in a measure satisfied with what she had done—went back by herself to the Munroes' villa, and found the household assembling for supper. She was very reticent over what had occurred; but subsequently she

told Flora that Captain Ludovick was setting out next morning for Kirk o' Shields, and that quite possibly Hugh might be sent for.

CHAPTER V.

MAN TO MAN.

THE only hotel that calls itself a hotel in Kirk o' Shields is chiefly a public-house on the ground-floor, with the upper rooms devoted to the entertainment of an occasional commercial traveller. It was at this hostelry that Ludovick Macdonell arrived, deposited his travelling-bag, and told the good landlady that he should want some dinner in the evening ; then he immediately sallied forth, making straight for the Minister's house. And very little did he notice of the squalor of these thoroughfares, or of the thick pall of smoke that did duty for a sky ; nor had he any objection

to this dull thunderous roar of hammer and engine and forge that seemed to fill the air for leagues around. To him Kirk o' Shields was an engrossingly interesting, even a fascinating, place: why, Alison had walked along these streets; when she was in Lochaber she had spoken of them and thought of them; now, at this very moment, there was the possibility that at any corner he might suddenly find himself face to face with—Alison!

He knocked at the Minister's door; it was opened by the red-headed, freckled servant-lass Jean. And it was clear that she instantly recognized him; for she retreated half a step, her black eyes looking frightened.

"Is Miss Alison at home?" he asked.

"N—no, sir," she stammered in reply.

"When will she be at home?"

"She's no staying here, sir!" the girl answered, rather breathlessly.

“What?” he said—for indeed he had paid but little attention to Mrs. Cowan’s threats.

“I dinna ken; and—and if I did ken, I daurna tell ye, sir.”

He seemed rather bewildered.

“What nonsense is this?” he said impatiently. “Is the Minister at home?”

“No, sir; this is ane o’ his veesitin days.”

“Well, Miss Agnes, then?”

“No, Miss Agnes is oot the noo.”

He was disconcerted only for a moment.

“Well, I’m coming in to wait until I see somebody,” he said, in a sufficiently decisive fashion; and as he forthwith entered the house, she had of course to make way for him; and she shut the outer door when he had gone by.

But as soon as she had followed him into the little parlour, an odd change came over Jean’s manner: she was now quite

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eager and communicative—in this safe privacy.

“Indeed, sir, there’s been an awfu’ to do; and ye’ll jist say ye insisted on coming into the hoose; for although I dinna think much o’ my place—they unco guid folk are ower guid for the like o’ me—I dinna want to be turned oot neck and crop at anither body’s biddin’; and I wasna to tell ye onything, or let ye into the hoose, or say a word to ye——”

“And whose orders were these?” he asked.

“Mrs. Cowan’s,” Jean said, looking a little frightened again.

“Is Mrs. Cowan your mistress?”

“No, Guid be thankit!” the girl said fervently. “But ye see, sir, she’s ta’en the upperhand in a’ this; and mind, ye maun say ye cam’ into the hoose withoot ony will o’ mine; but I’ll tell ye what I can—I wull, I wull—if I’m sent back to

Lernock-end the morn's morning. And I tell ye, sir, it's a downright crying shame the way they've been treatin' Miss Alison—preachin' at her frae the pulpit—frae the pulpit before a' they folk!—and that auld wife Cowan whinin' and whinin' about penitence and remission o' sins—it's just—it's just—but I'll no say a bad word, though they've been near drivin' me to't mair than ance; and there's Miss Agnes maistly oot o' her senses, and clean oot o' them she'll be ere lang—I've to sleep beside her at nights, that was Miss Alison's last word, and it's greetin' for hours she is; and then terrible talkin' about angels, and thrones; and her mother, that's dead and gone, puir body, ye would think her mother and hersel' were greetin' thegither about what has happened to Miss Alison. I declare I'm jist fair scunnered wi' they unco releegious folk, and I dinna care a docken how sune I'm back on Lernock-

side again, and herdin' my faither's kye, if I only get a sup o' milk for't ! ”

But the red-headed Jean's eager volubility contained no information.

“ Look here, my good girl,” said he gently, “ if you consider that Miss Alison has been so ill-used, don't you think you could give me a little help ? I've come to take her part—probably she will go away with me altogether. And I dare say you have been told not to say where she is : well, I won't ask you to tell me, plump and plain—still, couldn't you give me some small hint—just some kind of indication, you know, without actually saying anything that would get you into trouble ? ”

He put his hand in his waistcoat-pocket, and pulled out a sovereign ; but the moment she saw the money she shrank back.

“ Na, na ; I'll hae nane o' that ! ” said she, with considerable emphasis. “ I dinna ken what's to be the upshot o' a' this ; and

I'm no going to be cross-questioned before the Fiscal."

He hesitated for a moment. He was not quite sure of her; nor was he quite sure what he himself should do. It seemed too absurd that anybody should suppose that Alison could be carried off in this way and hidden from him. And might not this be merely a story that the servant-lass had been authorized to tell? Was it not quite probable that Alison was at this very moment upstairs—confined to her room under strict injunctions from her father? He looked at Jean again. Then he quietly went to the door, and opened it a few inches.

"Don't you think now," he said, fixing his eyes hard on the girl, "don't you think now, that if I were to call loud enough, Miss Alison would hear?"

But she was not startled.

"Ye think I'm leein—I'm *not* leein!"

she said, somewhat indignantly. "If I kened where Miss Alison was, I do believe I'd tell ye, and snap my fingers at the whole crew o' them—Corbieslaw as weel, though it was him got me my place."

"I do believe you would," he said, for he could no longer doubt the girl's sincerity, "and you'll just take this little present from me to buy yourself some ribbons when the fair-time comes round. It isn't a bribe; you haven't told me any secret; and the Fiscal may cross-examine you until his head drops off, when you have nothing to confess—don't you see that?"

He made her take the money; and they had some further conversation together, during which he learned that the Minister would not be home until the "hinner-end" of the day, and also that Jean was perfectly certain that Miss Agnes was as ignorant as herself concerning Alison's whereabouts. In these circumstances he

considered that it was hardly worth his while to spend the intervening hours in this dull little parlour ; and so, saying that he would return about the time the Minister was expected back, he left the house and wandered out into the streets. .

But the more he thought over all this matter, the more intolerable the insolence of this woman Cowan seemed to become. A cunning she-devil, Aunt Gilchrist had called her ; and no doubt she had got the Minister well under her thumb before he had allowed her to assume such authority over his own daughter. As for the farce of carrying Alison away into hiding, Captain Ludovick at first paid little heed to that. It was a preposterous piece of impudence, and nothing more. We were living in the nineteenth century. The Minister was a reasonable human being ; as soon as he was appealed to he would

recognize the futility of this attempted seclusion. It was merely the act of an intermeddling and ignorant woman, who did not know that there was such a thing as an order of the Court of Session—a remarkably imperative kind of thing, moreover. No doubt the Minister was a sort of recluse, and little conversant with the world's affairs; he had allowed this officious busybody to take charge of Alison; and it was her idiotic notion that she could keep the young wife away from her husband by the simple expedient of removing her to some other dwelling. Which of these houses, then, held Alison? Might she not see him from one of these windows? Or was it not possible he might meet her coming along this very thoroughfare—or coming round the corner of the next street? For they could not have locked her up. He reminded himself again that we were living in the nineteenth century; and,

indeed, was not much concerned about this foolish travesty of concealment.

But matters assumed a very different aspect in the evening. When he returned to the house, Mr. Blair was at home ; and Captain Macdonell was shown into the parlour. A moment thereafter the Minister made his appearance—the deeply-lined, sallow, sad face showing neither surprise nor anger, but only a calm self-possession ; and when he came into the room the two men remained standing, facing each other.

“ Mr. Blair, I want you to tell me where Alison is,” Macdonell said at once, and without further ceremony.

“ By what right do you ask ? ” the Minister made answer slowly.

The younger man was rather taken aback.

“ By what right ? By a very good right, I imagine. I presume you know—indeed,

you must know—that Alison and I are married.”

The Minister regarded him for a moment in silence ; and then said, in his measured and deliberate fashion—

“ You show some confidence, young man, in coming to me—to me, her father—with any such demand. I will not ask you what has been your conduct towards a young girl deprived for a brief time of parental guidance and advice, unprotected, alone, and ignorant of the consequences of her acts. I leave that to your own conscience. I am aware that in the hey-day of youth there may be an impetuosity that spurns all considerations and would sacrifice all interests and duties to its own selfish ends ; but in time the still small voice makes itself heard—if God is merciful to the transgressor. I do not seek now to bring home to you a sense of what you have done ; I leave that in higher hands

than mine ; but when you come to me and ask me to give my daughter into your charge—knowing as I do, that the consequence must be her spiritual ruin, the forfeiture of her soul's birthright—you cannot wonder if I distinctly say no."

"You call yourself a clergyman, a minister," Macdonell said hotly, "and you want to come between man and wife !"

But this stern-faced, sad-eyed old man was not to be moved into any angry retort.

"Well you know," he said, in those measured, impressive tones, "that your own Church—false and perverted, as we deem it to be, and a fountain of iniquity—even your Church refuses to recognize a civil marriage. And you, are you not governed by its doctrines and practices? Who is your lord and king? The Pope of Rome. In his eyes you are not married. In his eyes my daughter is not bounden to you by any tie whatever. If you have a

master, why not obey him? If you set him up as your king, why not serve him? If you have raised your idol on high, give him the worship and obedience due to him—and leave my daughter to live and die among her own kindred and those of her own faith.”

It was the very simplicity and dignity of this man—his inviolable and serene conviction—that seemed to drive Macdonell to desperation. He felt as if he were dashing himself against impalpable barriers that he was powerless to remove.

“I do know this,” he said somewhat excitedly, “that civil marriages are established by the law of this kingdom, and that whoever comes between husband and wife does so at his or her own peril. Do you think you can shut Alison up for ever? Do you think there is no means of discovering her? Why, I thought it was merely some foolish trick of that woman

Cowan ! But now you come forward ; you interpose ; you accept the responsibility of what this ignorant woman appears to have done. Well, what do you expect will come of it ? What do you hope to gain by it ? ”

“ With God’s blessing,” the Minister said calmly enough, “ we hope to undo much, if not all, of the evil you have wrought. We hope to bring the child to a perception of her error in having strayed away from the fold of her own people. Her seclusion may be temporary : when she comes forth from it, she will come forth as one purified and restored to her right mind ; and she will return to dwell within the tents of Israel, among her own.”

“ But this is mere madness ! ” the younger man exclaimed, for he was rapidly losing his self-control. “ She is married ! She is my wife ! I don’t know what your particular congregation may think ; but I

know that even in Catholic countries, let alone Protestant countries, civil marriages are recognized as freely as any other ; and I know in this country, that the law, which institutes civil marriage, is bound to hold it valid. Valid ?—I should think it was ! There is no marriage more absolute and irrevocable. And do you imagine I am going to stand by and allow Alison to be shut up like that, and preached at, and lectured into submission, and whined over ? I want to learn something about this instruction that is going on : I'm not quite satisfied about the gentle ways of the saints. And am I to understand that you definitely and finally refuse to tell me where Alison is ? ”

“ I do refuse,” the Minister said, with tranquil self-possession.

“ You don't know that I can compel you, then ? ” he demanded, with eyes afire.

"I know you cannot," was the calm answer.

"You think there is no law in this country?"

"You may appeal to the law if you choose to do so," Mr. Blair said slowly. "But there is no law in this country that can force me to open my mouth when my conscience bids me be silent; and there is no law in this country that can compel me to hand my child over to the emissaries of Satan. You may appeal to the law, young man: I owe obedience to a higher law: every moment of my life I stand before a tribunal compared with which all other tribunals are but as grains of sand on the sea-shore. We who regard all temporal things as of small moment stand in the presence of a greater Judge. 'The Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our King.'"

The moral grandeur of this old man, his

unflinching courage, the lofty position he had assumed were all lost upon his younger and fiercer antagonist, who exclaimed passionately—

“Very well, then, take the consequences ! You have treated that harmless girl—who is my wife, and whom I mean to protect, in spite of you—I say you have treated her with the most monstrous cruelty ; and since you have determined to bear the brunt of it, you shall ! You will discover that the laws of this country are not to be defied with impunity, whatever sophistical arguments you apply to your conscience. I tell you that I have the right to claim my wife ; you accept the responsibility of concealing her ; and if you persist in your refusal to produce her, then you will have leisure to think over your own folly, when you find yourself within the four walls of a jail !”

The Minister responded, with perfect serenity—

“I fear no earthly judge, nor any penalty he may inflict. In all things I would willingly obey those that are set in authority over us; but my chief allegiance lies elsewhere. If I have to go to prison, I hope to be as Peter and the other apostles when they were called before the Council and commanded to be beaten—they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.”

“Then to prison you shall go!” the young man said—his face grown bloodless and terrible to see; and without another word he burst from the room, and made his way along the passage, opening the door for himself and issuing into the street.

It was getting to dusk now; and mechanically and blindly he walked back to the humble hostelry, where dinner was awaiting him; but he could not eat anything; rage and fury filled his heart. He sat for a time there, thinking or trying to

think : then he got up and went out and made straight away for the open country—if that could be called country where there were forges and furnaces more frequently than farms, where there were stone dikes instead of hedges, and where the road-side he walked on was composed of cinders and broken slag. Into this mysterious dusk, lighted up by the wild flames of the iron-works, he walked recklessly and aimlessly, conjuring up all kinds of imaginary fears and evils, chiefly consisting of cruelties being practised on Alison. For the situation was far more serious now. This was no longer a mere ignorant device on the part of a stupid, ambitious, and scheming woman. This was a deliberate attempt to break the spirit of the girl ; a conspiracy ; and a conspiracy not over-scrupulous about invoking religious terrorism as a means of accomplishing its aim. And the law was on his side, he knew.

“Stone-walls do not a prison make?” he said to himself, with savage irony. “Well, perhaps not; but they form a remarkably good imitation of it!”

For he was determined to hold the Minister responsible for this thing that had been done—done with his sanction, if not even at his suggestion. Where Mrs. Cowan might be he knew not. Perhaps she had taken Alison out of the country altogether, in the hope that absence, and pious counsel, and misrepresentation and calumny might bring the girl to a final renunciation of her lover and husband. Where Alison might be—where her cunning she-devil of a guardian might be—he could not tell; but the Minister knew—he was here—he could be got at—he would be made to speak, if there was any law in this land. And if he would not speak?—then to jail with him! The Court of Session had a short way of deal-

ing with fanatics. Bravado was all very fine ; but bravado sometimes collapsed in presence of prison-fare and inside four square walls.

The young man's heart was hot within him. He began to recall, with a painful acuteness, certain terms of Mrs. Cowan's letter ; and the fancy that his young wife might be suffering all kinds of mental and moral torture in some unknown place, and thinking of him, and wondering why he did not come to her rescue—all this drove him to the verge of frenzy. He did not notice that it was now raining fast ; and he had neither over-coat nor umbrella. The black night was all around him ; and above him the heavy, red-pulsating skies : sometimes one of the iron-works sent up a sudden flame that threw his shadow across the half-seen highway. But while this wild war of piteous commiseration, and indignant wrath, and thirst for vengeance,

seemed driving him to distraction, plans were forming too. The very next morning he would go to Edinburgh and see his old friend Balwhinnan, an^e advocate there. Mr. Balwhinnan would advise him how to put the courts in motion ; the conspirators would speedily learn whether they could with impunity steal away a young wife from her husband. Going to jail for conscience' sake sounded very noble and heroic : perhaps when the moment arrived, that fanatical resolution would falter. But if not—if the Minister still remained obdurate—then let the law take its course ! If there were any question about the validity of the marriage, if there were any doubt as to the young husband's legal claim, this would be his answer ! Perhaps the doubts would be removed when the doubter found himself within the compass of a prison-cell.

And sometimes a haunting voice would

try to say to him, "What is this you are about to do? On whom are you going to wreak your vengeance? In your inmost heart you know that this old man is no fanatic, no maniac, no charlatan, but one who believes in the Divine government of the world, who knows that for every action of his life he is accountable to his Maker, who is ready to suffer all things rather than offend against his conscience. Are you so blind that you cannot perceive the moral elevation—the invulnerable and austere integrity—of such a man? What does he care for your threats? What are your prison-walls to him?"

But he would not hear. Before his burning eyes there was a vision of Alison in her father's pew, her head bent forward, and tears streaming down her face, while that congregation of sanctimonious Pharisees looked on and rejoiced that the Minister's daughter was stricken low and

repentant and ashamed of her transgression. And there was another vision as well—of Aunt Gilchrist's "cunning she-devil"—the cat-like guardian of her pale prisoner, the whining preacher, the wheedling and coaxing match-maker; and he swore with his teeth set hard that the lawyers should pay a little attention to her also!

By-and-by he turned and set out again for Kirk o' Shields, through the thick rain. There was no chance of his missing his way—the sombre red glow was ever present there, in the midst of the black night. When he reached the inn he was drenched through; but with the carelessness of a Highlander he sat down and ate some food; and then he told the people that when he went to bed they must get his clothes dried, for he was leaving early in the morning. It was to Edinburgh he was going.

CHAPTER VI.

SOME SURPRISES.

ON Macdonell's arrival in Edinburgh he drove to a hotel in Prince's Street, where he was well-known, left his travelling-gear there, and forthwith set out on foot to seek his friend Balwhinnan, whose house was in Moray Place. There had been rain earlier in the morning, but now wan gleams of sunshine were appearing; and picturesque indeed were those masses of tall black buildings, and the innumerable spires, and the great bulk of the castled rock all rising away into a confusion of golden clouds and moving mists and smoke. But he had little thought either

for the outward aspect of this noble thoroughfare, or for the thousand memories and associations that it naturally awakens. His heart was burning with a fierce desire for vengeance—vengeance on those who had taken away his young wife from him, and treated her so cruelly. And when he got to Moray Place, and found that the famous advocate was at home, he rejoiced in his wrath ; retribution, swift and dire, was now to be meted out, and that with a firm hand.

He was ushered into a long and lofty apartment which seemed to be partly a library and partly an ornithological museum ; for above the shelves of books that went round the walls there ran a continuous glass-case filled with stuffed birds—mostly sea-birds from the northern coasts and isles—while on a table close up to one of the windows some skins were lying, along with all the implements of the

taxidermist's art, pins, sealing-wax, colours, glass eyes, arsenic paste, and what not. Had his mind been less perturbed, he might have sought out in that collection certain specimens that he himself had contributed; but as it was he was waiting impatiently for the lawyer's appearance.

The door opened; Mr. Balwhinnan entered, bawling out a jovial and hearty greeting as he came forward to meet his friend. He was a man of about six feet two in height, spare of frame, with a long, thin, clean-shaven face, a retreating forehead, an aquiline nose, sandy hair, fresh complexion, and gray eyes that were sufficiently merry and good-natured.

"And what's brought ye to Edinburgh, Macdonell?" he cried, as he hauled along a couple of chairs to the central table. "Man, that was a fine velvet duck you sent me—as handsome a fellow as ever I set eyes on; do you see him up yonder?"

Macdonell did not even glance in the direction indicated.

“Look here, Balwhinnan,” said he, “I’ve come to ask you for advice in a very serious affair. You know Gemmill and Inglis do what little law-business we want done ; but I could not go to them about this matter ; I want the advice of a friend as well as a lawyer ; you must tell me precisely what my position is, and what steps I am to take.”

Then Ludovick Macdonell began and told his story ; and it might have been remarked that during this narrative a singular change came over Mr. Balwhinnan’s expression. He was no longer the bluff, hearty, sportsman-looking person who had noisily come into the room ; his eyes had lost their merry good-nature and were keen and scrutinizing ; his lips seemed to be thinner ; and it may be added that if his forehead was distinctly retreating his

head was long-shaped behind. Watchful and silent he sat, until the tale was told ; and it was not for a second or two thereafter that he attempted to answer the younger man's appeal.

“ My good fellow,” said he slowly, “ you have certainly got yourself into a very extraordinary position, and the way out of it isn't as easy as you seem to imagine. I'm afraid the law is powerless to do what you want. You see, if it were the case of a child who was being kept back and concealed, and if you were her legal guardian, you could petition the Court of Session for the custody of the child ; you would get a warrant for her recovery, and if the person concealing her refused to hand her over, or refused to tell the court where she was, that person would forthwith find himself or herself in prison. But your wife is in the eyes of the law capable of acting for herself ; she is away from you of her own

free-will ; and the law of Scotland gives the husband no power to compel his wife to live with him against her inclination. Of course," said he, with a swift look of inquiry, " I assume that she *is* away of her own free-will ? You don't suppose that she is locked up anywhere and kept a prisoner by force ? "

" No, no ; that is too absurd," Macdonell said hastily ; " but if I admit that she is away of her own free-will, I mean that she has been subjected to all kinds of influences, that she has been misinformed and terrorized over ; and what is more, I am perfectly certain of this, that if I could compel them to tell me where she is, if I could get to her, I should have no trouble at all in bringing her away from them. None. I know her too well. I know what they have been doing—— "

" Yes, yes, my dear fellow," Mr. Balwhinnan said bluntly, " but in the mean

time you must take it that she is remaining away from you of her own choice. Now, I am afraid it is English law that has been running in your head. In England the husband can not only bring a suit for the restitution of conjugal rights, and compel his wife to live with him, whether she is willing or not, but he can also bring an action for damages against any one who is foolish or daring enough to harbour her. Here it isn't so at all. In Scotland the law gives better protection to the wife who, for whatever reason, is resolved to remain apart from her husband; and not only that, but provision is made by which the marriage may be annulled——”

“Good heavens, man, what are you talking about!” Macdonell exclaimed, in sudden dismay. For was this the loophole of escape that Mrs. Cowan had spoken of? Perhaps she was not so ignorant after all? “You don't mean to

say that a legal marriage can be dissolved for that reason alone ? ”

“ In Scotland, yes,” Mr. Balwhinnan replied calmly. “ And why not ? It is a just and a reasonable statute. What is the use of compelling husband and wife to live together when either is unwilling ? What happiness can result from that ? Our Scotch law protects the wife, certainly ; but it also gives the husband his remedy. It does not say that the wife, if she chooses, may remain apart from her husband, and the husband still remain tied by the marriage-bond. No. That would be obviously and monstrously unfair. What he is entitled to do is to bring an action for adherence ; then if she doesn’t obey the order of the court—that is to say, if she refuses to come and live with him—at the expiry of four years he can get a divorce from her, and both are freed.”

“ Do you mean that he can get a divorce

from her for that reason alone?" Macdonell demanded, with not a little consternation—for it was becoming clear to him what the woman Cowan had meant.

"Undoubtedly," was the lawyer's answer. "And that is all he can do. He has no compulsory power over her whatsoever. And that is the awkwardness of your position, my good friend. By George, I wish I could help you! But I can't; all the lawyers in the kingdom couldn't. What you've got to do is to find out for yourself where your wife is, and then you can reason with her, or perhaps get her away from any terrorism that may be held over her. But that is for herself to say; they cannot keep her, you cannot take her, against her will."

Macdonell rose and began to pace up and down the floor in the greatest perplexity and perturbation.

"Oh, I know what she would do if I

could only get hold of her hand for a moment!" he exclaimed presently. "Do you think I don't know that? Do you think she married me for nothing? It was to be a bond between us for ever, just in case her friends should interfere! They have interfered; they have told her lies; they have frightened her with the horror and sanctimonious lamentation of those elders and their wives; then she has been accustomed to obey her father; and this she-devil of a woman has coaxed or wheedled or threatened her into compliance. I have no doubt she said to herself, 'Well, what does it matter? I will obey them; the bond between my husband and myself remains all the same; they cannot break that; and he will come and take me away before long.' And do you mean to tell me," he continued passionately, "that I have no means of claiming my own? The law gives her to me, but gives me no

power to claim her, even if she is willing to come! I cannot compel those people to say where she is? I cannot send them to jail if they refuse to tell me? There is the old man her father: he takes the whole responsibility on his shoulders; he comes forward and gives you to understand that it is his doing—and yet the law can neither make him speak nor punish him for refusing to speak. Is that the law?"

The long sandy-haired advocate answered quietly enough, "If it is revenge you want, you can have it."

"Then I do want it!" the young man said vehemently. "Not revenge—I don't want revenge—I want punishment. If that old Minister will not tell me where Alison is, I want to see him lodged in jail—and kept there until he speaks!"

"Oh, you can do that," Mr. Balwhinnan said. "But mind this, Macdonell, while I

tell you, as a lawyer, what the law is, I don't, as a friend, advise you to put it in operation. And there is no doubt you could have the old gentleman sent to prison, but it would be by means of a trick—well, I won't precisely say that, but you could only proceed against him indirectly. What you would have to do would be to bring your action for adherence; then call him as a witness; he could be asked to say where his daughter was; and if the court ordered him to answer, and if—as is very likely, for those old Free Kirk fellows have stubborn wills where their conscience is concerned—if he refused to answer, he would assuredly be sent to prison for contempt.”

“Very well, then, I'll have it done!” the young man said, with resolute lips.

The long lawyer lay back in his chair, and regarded his friend.

“Don't you think,” he said slowly, “that

you could find some quieter way out of it? It would rather make a scandal, wouldn't it? If you are so sure that the young lady would forsake them and come away with you if once you had the chance of removing certain false impressions from her mind, wouldn't it be better to seek for that chance?"

"Bless my soul, how can I search all Scotland to find her?" the younger man cried. "And how do I know that she is in Scotland? They may have taken her abroad."

"I should imagine," Mr. Balwhinnan made answer, with professional serenity, "from all you have told me, that it is almost a matter of certainty she is under the guardianship of that Mrs. Cowan. Well, now, do you think a Lanarkshire farmer's wife is the kind of person to pay a flying visit to the south of Spain, or adventure on a voyage out to the Canaries?"

I should fancy you might try somewhere nearer home. What was the name of the farm you mentioned ? ”

“ Corbieslaw.”

“ In the neighbourhood of Kirk o’ Shields ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Don’t you think, now, you might pay a little attention to that farm-house ? ” the lawyer said, glancing at his friend. “ A little prospecting about would do no harm. I wouldn’t have any professional detective as yet ; but you might get somebody to keep an eye on the place—— ”

“ By Jove, Balwhinnan, that is a most sensible suggestion,” Ludovick exclaimed, with eagerness, for his imagination was fired by the possibility of finding Alison so near him, and so soon to be discovered and released and borne away in triumph—
“ a capital suggestion ! I’ll tell you what I’ll do : I’ll telegraph to her cousin Hugh,

in Fort William—he's a great chum of mine—and he'll come through at once, and bring with him as well a young lad they have there, who has the cunning and the endurance of a wild-cat; and we'll see if among us we can't find out Alison. Hugh can come down to Oban by this evening's steamer, stay the night there, and catch the first train in the morning. Of course he will stop at Kirk o' Shields station, and I shall be there to meet him, even if I go through this evening—no, not this evening"—he corrected himself, with sudden remorse for his forgetfulness of this good friend's kindness to him. "No, I want you to dine with me this evening, Balwhinnan; will you?"

"Yes, I will," the other said promptly; "for my wife is with her Wigtownshire friends at present. And as it is near lunch-time now, you'll just walk along with me to my club and we'll have a snack, and

then I want you to look at some new additions to the Advocates' Library."

"All right," Macdonell said. "I'm always glad to drop in there, if only to have a glance at the standard that brave fellow brought home from Flodden Field."

"And there's another thing I want to say to you, my young sir," the advocate continued, as the two of them were walking towards Prince's Street. "Mrs. Balwhinnan will be home again in a few days' time. Now, if you succeed in liberating the captive, I suppose—well, it's none of my business—but I should imagine you might be contemplating a little wedding-trip just to get the young lady securely away from those people. In that case, she wouldn't be likely to have bridal travelling-dresses, and such things, eh? Well, if you want to have her nicely fitted out, just you bring her along to Moray Place, and she will be our guest for a few days, and Mrs. Bal-

whinnan will be delighted to be a mother to her ; for of course she must go abroad with all due state and ceremony."

"Do you mean that?" Macdonell said, involuntarily stopping short for a second, and with his eyes flashing gratitude.

"I sometimes mean what I say, although I am a lawyer," the tall Sutherlandshire-looking man made answer imperturbably, as he continued his long, measured stride across Charlotte Square.

But these anticipations were all too premature and roseate, as Ludovick Macdonell was soon to discover. When Hugh, accompanied by Johnny—who regarded this expedition into foreign countries as a very wonderful thing indeed—arrived in Kirk o' Shields, all three set about their amateur-detective work with the greatest eagerness, and also with the certain conviction they must discover where Alison was concealed. But day after day went by,

and they could find no clue whatsoever. They bribed the letter-carrier who traversed the Corbieslaw district ; and Macdonell made the acquaintance of the modest and shy-eyed young lady who was behind the counter at the post-office ; but the most cautious and discreet of questions met with no satisfactory reply. It was the especial charge of Johnny, as being a less conspicuous figure than Hugh or Ludovick, to keep an eye on Corbieslaw farm ; and this duty he performed most faithfully ; for, indeed, how could there be a more delightful occupation than to sit on the top of a stone dike, with one's hands in one's pockets, and with whole hours in which to whistle " The Hills of Glenorchy " ? Nevertheless, this espionage did not wholly commend itself to Johnny's mind.

" What uss't Macdonell wants ? " he said to Hugh, on one occasion, when Captain Ludovick chanced to be absent. " Does

he want to put the auld wife into the pollus-offus ? ”

“ Never you mind what he wants,” Hugh made answer. “ It’s your business to find out whether Miss Alison is at the farm.”

“ If I wass Macdonell,” said John, in his cool fashion, “ I would find that out for myself—ay, before another hour wass over.”

“ And how could you find it out ? ” Hugh said contemptuously.

“ I would tek a stuck in my hand,” said Johnny, “ and I would go up to the farm, and I would go into the house, and I would go into every room in the house, and if any one tried to stop me I would hit him over the head with the stuck.”

“ Yes, you would have somebody in the police-office very soon—but it would be yourself.’

“ Cosh, but I would find out, though,” John maintained confidently. “ Macdonell

uss a strong man : with a stuck in his hand, who would try to stop him ? ”

However, both Hugh and Captain Ludovick were now inclining to the belief that neither Mrs. Cowan nor Alison was at Corbieslaw. Johnny brought reports about all the other people—the farmer himself, the fledgling minister, the men and women servants—but no one answering to the description of the farmer’s wife had made her appearance ; and it was unlikely she would have remained in-doors all this time had she been in the house. Their vigilant search was turned elsewhere, but with a distressing vagueness of aim. Mr. Balwhinnan’s idea was that Mrs. Cowan and her charge would be found to have gone not very far away ; but in what direction ? And the more Macdonell chafed at this enforced delay, the more helpless he felt himself, and the more he harrowed himself with baleful fancies as to all that Alison

might be suffering, the more he returned to his sombre thoughts of vengeance.

“And that’s what it is coming to,” he said to Hugh, as they conversed together in the inn, of an evening, over the one all-engrossing subject. “That is what must be done. Oh, it’s all very well for you to talk of abstract right ; but I want rough justice done ; and justice says that if this old man will not tell me where Alison is, then let him go to jail ! What do I care what the public say ? I’m not thinking about the public ; I’m thinking about Alison.”

“Why are you defending yourself so vehemently, Ludovick ?” Hugh retorted, and also with some warmth. “Because you know that if you do this thing you will be acting wrongly and meanly, and in a way you will regret all your life. Why, according to your own version of the story, Alison’s father is to be respected : it is his

conscience that refuses to tell you what you want to know."

"His conscience!" Ludovick exclaimed. "Has he the only conscience in the world? But that's the way with people who pride themselves on having a highly superior and sensitive conscience; they alone have such a thing; other people haven't any! Their sense of right allows them to take away a young girl and treat her most cruelly; but if my sense of right tells me that I shall be a contemptible coward if I don't use every means in my power to prevent them so treating her, then I am to pay no heed to that? They've got all the conscience, then? Conscience only exists and lives in Kirk o' Shields, and in that congregation of whining Pharisees!"

"I can quite understand your anger, Ludovick," Hugh said, in his gentle way, and yet with a quiet firmness that seemed beyond his years, "and your impatience

and indignation ; but I tell you that if you set the law in operation against this old man, you will be doing the wrong thing. I shouldn't be your friend if I did not say so. It isn't right ; you may talk and argue as much as you please, but it isn't the right thing. You would see that for yourself, if you weren't fancying every minute that Alison was being treated harshly. But do you think that probable ? Do you think she is the sort of girl to submit tamely ? Well, I don't. She could always hold her own with Aunt Gilchrist : is it likely she would let this Mrs. Cowan intimidate her ?”

“ I won't allow any man or woman to try !” young Macdonell said, with burning eyes. “ No, not if I can step in to take her part !”

“ But is it likely she is being badly treated ?” Hugh said again. “ Look at the letter that Mrs. Cowan wrote to Aunt Gilchrist.”

“Yes!—and Alison before the whole congregation of them—crying.”

“But apparently she is under Mrs. Cowan’s charge now,” Hugh continued; “and what motive could she have for treating Alison badly? Look at the letter. It was a slavish and despicable letter, no doubt, but it was all done to propitiate Aunt Gilchrist, and to keep her in the same mind as regards Alison and the money she intends to give her. Mrs. Cowan means to get that money for her son’s wife: is she likely to do anything that would offend either Alison or Aunt Gilchrist?”

“Yes, but I want to know: I want to see for myself,” the young husband said. “It seems to me I have some right to learn for myself what is going on. And I tell you this, that whoever stands in my way must take the consequences.”

“Ludovick,” said this gentle-voiced lad, “I dare say you don’t care what people

generally would say ; but I want to ask you this : supposing you get your Edinburgh lawyers to bring the whole affair into court, and supposing that Mr. Blair refuses to answer, then no doubt he will have to suffer the consequences : but, Ludovick, what will Alison think of the man who has sent her father to prison ? ”

Macdonell winced at this, and was silent for a moment or two ; but then he said—

“ I don’t send him to prison. If he chooses to defy the law of the country, it is that sends him to prison. Why should he be exempted any more than any one else ? If a man breaks into my house, and robs me, it isn’t I who send him to prison ; it is the law, that all of us have to obey. And why should this old Minister be exempt ? If, out of pure pig-headed obstinacy, he courts imprisonment, why, let him have it ! ”

“ Ludovick, you are not talking like

yourself," Hugh said. "I wish to goodness we could find Alison; and if once you saw that she wasn't being ill-treated, you wouldn't have such a fierce desire for vengeance."

"But she *has* been ill-treated: and is no one to suffer for that?" the other demanded.

"At all events it is not for you, in the position you hold with regard to this old man, it is not for you to put the law in motion, and get him thrown into jail. I tell you it is not right," Hugh continued, with some emphasis. "It is not right; and if you do it, you will regret it as long as ever you live."

But even Hugh was puzzled to say what should be done, in face of the fact that despite all their search and inquiry they could find no trace whatsoever of Mrs. Cowan and her ward. On the very next day, as it happened, Ludovick encountered

Alison's sister Agnes, as he was walking along the unfrequented thoroughfare overlooking the canal and certain large iron-works. He was startled to see how ill the girl looked ; and he might probably have passed her without recognition, had he not got into the habit of scanning eagerly every face he saw, even at a distance. When Agnes perceived who this stranger was, she started back in affright, and no doubt would have sought to avoid him, but that he intercepted her.

“Miss Agnes!” he said, as a sort of appeal.

“I—I should not speak to you,” answered the girl, whose pale face was now paler than ever, and whose large and wistful eyes were like those of some startled wild animal.

“But you will speak to me—for Alison's sake!” he said. “Tell me where she is! That is all I want to know—it is not much for you to say!”

She glanced backward along the road ; there was no one there but some children playing.

“ If I knew, I would tell you, indeed I would,” she said, at once hurriedly and piteously. “ Oh, Captain Macdonell, it is terrible to have Alison away like that—as if she were dead. Her name is never mentioned ; the letters you sent her are lying there unopened ; I don’t know where she is ; and I dare not ask. And then it is so hopeless. If she were to come back, it would only be worse. You know how gentle and kind Alison always is ; but she has a great deal of firmness, too, when she thinks she is in the right. And nothing will make her yield now : if she were to come back, she might be in the same house with my father, but they would not recognize each other ; and I can look forward to nothing but misery—— ”

The girl’s eyes filled with tears ; for she

was a sensitive, tremulous kind of creature ; and she had been very fond of her sister.

“ But why didn’t Alison open my letters ? ” he demanded.

“ They came after she left,” was the answer. “ She was sent away almost immediately—on the Monday morning after she had been prayed for in the church. Oh, it was terrible, her going away : I never saw my father look like that before—so stern and implacable : though he hardly said anything. It was Alison who spoke most ; but she was quite quiet, though she was white as white ; and she said that if he wished her to leave the house, she would go ; and she would go wherever Mrs. Cowan chose to take her ; but she said that as soon as you came for her, it was her husband she would obey, and no one else ; and she would wait until you told her what you wished her to do—— ”

“She said that?” he exclaimed, quickly.

“Yes, indeed,” Agnes made answer.
“And although she was crying when she left the house, I know it is useless for Mrs. Cowan to think she will talk her over. When Alison sees a thing clearly, and knows it to be right, nothing will make her yield about it; and if you were to go to her, Captain Macdonell, she would do what you asked her to do, because she said she would obey her husband; but it is hopeless for Mrs. Cowan to think she will persuade her into anything else—yes, and that’s why it is useless and hopeless to bring her back to Kirk o’ Shields——”

“Then she is not in Kirk o’ Shields?” he interposed suddenly.

“I don’t know,” Agnes said, with the most obvious simplicity and sincerity—in truth, a more guileless face than that of this pale, delicate-looking, wistful-eyed girl could hardly be imagined. “Sometimes I

think she cannot be, or some one would have seen her and told me. But her name is never mentioned in the house. It is just as if she were dead. Once or twice at family worship my father makes some reference that you might fancy applied to Alison; but that is only part of what he may be thinking himself; he says nothing openly; and it's just as if she had never been in the house at all."

"And you have not the slightest idea where she is?" he asked again.

"No," said she rather sadly, "none. But you—now you have come here—don't you think you will be able to find her?"

"Oh, I will find her," said he, with something more than confidence in his tone. "I may have an unpleasant duty to perform as a preliminary step; but I will undertake to find her."

"And when you do, Captain Macdonell, you will let me know?—you will tell me

that Ailie is well—and—and perhaps a little happier than when she went away from us? If you knew what it has been to me to see all this trouble, and not to be able to help; and now I am quite alone; and I dare not mention her name. Ailie and I were always such close companions——”

She stopped, for her lips were tremulous.

“Oh, I’ll find her out, never fear,” he said in a more gentle way, “and you shall be the first to know, depend on that. Alison herself will write to you; and when you hear from her you may be sure she is no longer in any kind of captivity, or being lectured or preached at in any way whatsoever.”

“Good-bye,” she said; and she would have gone on so, but that he remonstrated with her.

“Won’t you shake hands with me?”

Somewhat timidly the girl gave this

dangerous person, this Roman Catholic, her hand ; and then she so far overcame her shyness as to raise her eyes for a moment.

“ Be kind to Ailie,” she said—these were her parting words as she turned and went hurriedly away.

It was with no little exultation that Ludovick now hastened back to the inn, where he found Hugh just arrived from the fruitless watchings and wanderings of the morning ; and eagerly, as they sat over their frugal midday meal, he told his friend the story of this interview with Agnes, and its revelations. And now he was grown impatient of their amateur-detective work ; he would forthwith go through to Edinburgh and put the case, under this new light, before Balwhinnan, who would advise him what to do next. Moreover, he no longer spoke of vengeance ; he was only anxious to release Alison from

captivity ; and what he insisted on was that if the courts were put in motion, and Mr. Blair summoned as a witness, the old Minister would say where Alison was as a matter of course, for the simple reason that he must know, after Alison's declaration, that detaining her under any kind of guardianship was absolutely useless. But Hugh warmly protested.

“ Depend on this, Ludovick, that he will not be affected by any considerations of that kind. He will refuse to be a party to handing his daughter over to a Roman Catholic ; and he will suffer anything rather than yield. What will be the result ? The court must punish him for contempt, to uphold its own dignity : you will have sent him to prison whether you intended it or not. And I tell you you will be sorry—sorrrier than you think now. Why should you do such a thing ? You don't imagine, after what Agnes has said, that Alison is

being ill-treated ; and you don't call out for vengeance on account of what she has suffered. Very well, let us take peacefuller means ; and don't send that old man to prison ! Let us go to Edinburgh and get a couple of professional detectives, if you like. But not till to-morrow. I have my eye on a house in Coatbridge Street that that divinity student fellow has called at twice during the last three days, and there is a backyard to it, with a high stone-wall round it, where a couple of prisoners might easily get a little exercise unseen. I still think Mr. Balwhinnan was right, and that you'll find Mrs. Cowan is not so far away. Wait till to-morrow in any case ; and then we can go to Edinburgh and see about getting some professional help."

However, as it chanced, it was no professional detective who discovered a clue to the whereabouts of Mrs. Cowan and Alison : it was the lad John. Johnny, on

this same afternoon, was as usual prowling about the neighbourhood of Corbieslaw, but quite carelessly now, for he had become convinced that Mrs. Cowan and Alison were not at the farm. And Johnny was angry that he had spent so much time for nothing ; for Ludovick Macdonell, in order to render him diligent, had said something encouraging about his astuteness ; and Johnny did not like the idea of going back to Lochaber a confessed failure. On this particular evening, towards dusk, he happened to observe, at a considerable distance, the figure of the "stickit minister," who was coming along the road towards the farm ; and by some lucky accident, some flash of inspiration, a daring design sprung into Johnny's brain. The fields in this part of the country are divided from the highway, not by hedges, but by big solid stone-walls, the gate in which is made of strips of iron. Johnny instantly

went and opened one of these gates just so far as to let himself through ; and there he crouched down behind the wall and waited in the gathering dusk for the coming of the probationer. The Rev. James Cowan, dreaming of no harm — dreaming, perhaps, of the brighter days in store for him when he should be released from the baleful tyranny of his father, and set up in an establishment of his own in Edinburgh, with Alison as his house-mistress, and this congregation and that vying with each other as to the earnestness of their “call” to him—the Rev. James Cowan came along the black pathway, and passed the partly opened gate without thought of harm. But hardly had he passed when Johnny, issuing from his concealment, followed with one or two swift and stealthy steps, and then with a sudden, startling cry, sprang like a wild-cat on the shoulders of the hapless probationer, hurl-

ing him forward, prone, on the path-way, and pinning him face downward with a grip of two muscular hands on his throat.

“*Heeg-a-neesh ! — heeg-a-neesh !*” * he yelled, while the luckless minister, frightened out of his wits, in vain attempted to free himself from this horrible incubus. “The Duffle is on you!—the big Duffle is on you!—tell me now where Miss Alison is—where is she?—tell me now, or the Duffle, the Duffle will hef your head off!”

Again and again the captive strove to cast off this terrible unknown thing that had seized him; but the weakly, white-faced, ill-made probationer was no match for this heavy-shouldered demon of a lad, whose hands were as hard as iron with rowing. To save himself from actual strangulation, the black-coated youth gasped out—

“She—she’s in Portobello.”

* “*Thig-a-nis !*”—Come along, now !

“What place is that?” Johnny cried, with ferocious determination. “Tell me again now, or the Duffle will hef your head off!—the Duffle, the Duffle hass you!—tell me again—what place is it?”

“Port—Portobello!” the probationer managed to ejaculate, as well as Johnny’s iron fingers would allow him—and the next moment he found himself free.

But long before the bewildered and stupefied minister could pull himself together, Master Johnny was flying down the road towards Kirk o’ Shields, shrieking with eldritch laughter, and calling aloud from time to time the talismanic word in his wild delight.

“Portobello!—aw, it’s Portobello, uss it; and a fine name too! Aw, a fine name that! And what will Macdonell say now? Cosh, that fellow’s aweh hom; and he’s thinking the big Duffle wass on his back; but Macdonell will be giffing me some-

thing for this night's work. ·Portobello!—
aw, Cosh, it's a fine place, Portobello, if I
will be getting any money for it! Go
aweh hom, you black-cotted fellow, and
tell them what the Duffle wass doing to
you in the middle of the rod! Hurrah,
now, and another hurrah!—there wass no
one could find it out but myself; and the
Duffle was a good friend to me this
night!”

CHAPTER VII.

A BATTLE ROYAL.

LUDOVICK MACDONELL had of course heard of Portobello, but he had never been there, nor had Hugh ; and both of them, imagining it to be merely an ordinary small seaside village, thought they would have no difficulty in finding Alison and carrying her off from her temporary jailer. So, when they went through to Edinburgh, they did not think of going to see Mr. Balwhinnan ; they were in too great a hurry ; they left their things at the hotel where Macdonell was known ; they hired an open fly that happened to be coming along Prince's Street at the moment ; and

by-and-by they found themselves rattling through the rather melancholy eastern suburbs of the city, and out into the pallid semblance of the country that was all vague and dismal under the haze of a north-east wind.

But when they drew near to Portobello, and when they had got through the smoke of its outlying potteries and gas-works, and entered the old-fashioned, Scotch-looking town, and still more when they left the fly behind them, and walked down to the sea-front, and found the long extent of brown sand literally swarming with holiday-makers, mostly women and children, they perceived that this was a far bigger place than they had bargained for, and that their task was not to be so extremely simple. Macdonell had looked with intensest interest as they passed at each of those little villas, with its front of black-gray stone and small garden; for any one

of them might hold the prisoner he was come to liberate ; and it was strange to think that perhaps this or that door was the only thing that intervened between him and Alison. But when they got down to the beach, the sight of the big modern houses and the swarming population rather chilled his eager hopes ; and when they walked out the pier—which seemed a kind of fashionable promenade—he grew familiar with disappointment, as stranger after stranger came nearer, and passed by unheeded. Nor was the day one to exhilarate the spirits and cheer him with fond anticipations. The bleak north-easter had brought mist with it, so that Inchkeith rock was just visible and no more ; but the wind was not strong enough to raise anything of a sea, and the wide waste of desolate gray water lapped languidly into the shore, where it took a tinge of muddy brown from the sand. The flashing blue

waves, the silver-gleaming clouds, the wild rain of the west had no place here ; everything was gray and cold and dull ; it seemed impossible to him that Alison should be anywhere in this nebulous, fluctuating, uninteresting throng.

“ Oh, don't be so hopeless all at once ! ” Hugh said to him. “ That is only a first impression. It won't be so difficult ; we must find her, now that we know where she is. Johnny,” he said, turning to the lad, who was but a step behind them, “ you don't suppose the stickit minister was playing a trick on you when he said Portobello ? ”

“ Uss it a trick ? ” said Johnny, brightening up at once. “ Cosh, there wass no trick in his head when he thought the Duffle wass on his shoulders ! Ay, and he's thinking that now, I'm sure, and it will be a fine thing for him to tell them from the pulpit—that he wass fighting

with the Duffle in the middle of the rod!"

Hugh turned to his companion.

"What we have to do is this," said he, "we must take rooms in that small hotel we passed, and have our things sent down from Edinburgh. You know now all that you want to know; Alison is here; and she is ready to go with you whenever you ask her to do that. Of course we must see her sooner or later walking about, or coming out of a house, or going into one: and we must have a fly waiting in readiness at the hotel, so that she may be taken away with as little fuss as possible. There will be a fuss, no doubt, if Mrs. Cowan is with her at the time—there will be a mighty row, in fact; for although she can't prevent your taking Alison away, she can make a scene, and give you a bit of her mind. You'll get the worst of that, Ludovick," he continued, with rather a

grim smile. "You'll decidedly get the worst of that; if I were you, I wouldn't say a word. By George, I'd give something to have Aunt Gilchrist here just at that moment; then you'd see the fur fly! I'd back the Highland bantam to make a poor thing of the Southerner—unless, indeed, Mrs. Cowan went on the other tack, and began to whine. She won't whine with you, Ludovick, you may be sure; you will have it served up hot and hot."

"I am not likely to mind that much," Ludovick said indifferently, "if once I had got hold of Alison. But the worst of it is that we haven't the slightest idea what this woman Cowan is like; we might meet her half a dozen times without knowing it; our only chance is to find Alison herself."

"And of course we shall find her," Hugh said instantly (for he was always afraid of Macdonell returning to his project

of appealing to the law, and compelling the old Minister to speak, or else to go to jail). "This isn't like an ordinary town; they are sure to come out for a walk, and they are sure to stroll along the sea-front, or out this pier. Now let us have a distinct understanding; if you can get clear away with Alison, you put her in the cab, and drive off with her to Edinburgh; if there's any row, leave Johnny and me to see it out. Once you've put Alison under Mrs. Balwhinnan's care—that's the proposal, isn't it?—there will be no chance of further trouble; you won't catch Mrs. Cowan hammering at an advocate's door and screaming for the police. She must know well enough that you have the law on your side; I don't believe she's half the ignorant person you seem to think her. And here is Johnny all impatience to begin a search of the town; you're determined to win that gun, aren't you, Johnny?"

"I wass thinking that if Miss Alison uss in this place, I will be finding her before long," observed Johnny, who was rather giving himself airs now since his exploit on the highway.

"If you do," Ludovick said to this heavy, lumbering, shrewd-eyed lad, "I'll not only give you the gun, but you may come out from time to time to Oyre, and if you find any hoodie-crows along the rocks, I'll give you a shilling for every one you kill."

"A shullin?" said John quickly.

"Yes."

"And mebbe you'll be for giffing me a few cartridges," said John insidiously.

"Oh yes, I'll give you a few cartridge's, now and again, but not to be fired away in the air, or at marks. You'll have to stalk the hoodie-crows, for they're precious cunning, and when you get at one of the brutes, you shoot him sitting, mind that, or anyhow you can manage it."

“Well, he may be cunning,” said John, reflectively, “but mebbe there’s other folk chist as cunning as him. I’ve catched a snail by the horns before now—though I could not throw the little duffle over my shoulder.”

And indeed, as it turned out, it was Johnny’s proud privilege to secure that precious gun, and that in a far more simple way than any one of them had hoped for. Ludovick and Hugh were walking back through the town towards the hotel which has been mentioned, when Johnny, who was lingering behind them somewhat, suddenly saw a face present itself at the window of one of the small villas they were passing, and then there was a quick rapping on the framework, and also, as he thought, a half-stifled cry. Instantly he called to the two in front of him.

“Here!—here!—Mr. Hugh!”

They wheeled round. But Johnny

could say nothing ; he was frightened ; he was staring at the window which was now quite empty. And then—it all seemed to happen in one brief bewildering second—the door of the house was thrown open, and there stood Alison, rose-red, and smiling, and yet with anxious and pleading eyes. Ludovick was up the steps and by her side in a moment, and holding her by both hands.

“ Have you come for me, Ludovick ?—are you going to take me away with you ? ” she said ; but the proud and glad light that shone in her eyes showed that she knew what his answer would be.

“ Indeed, I have come for you,” said he, and he drew her a little way into the passage. It seemed a wonderful thing to see Alison’s face upturned to his again, and her soft eyes all radiant, and her lips smiling : this was not the tear-worn Alison he had been thinking of ; this was rather

the happy bride, rose-red and shy, and yet blithe of look, who had come sailing away with him on board the steamer. "And I'm going to take you away with me, you may be sure of that—now, this very minute. But what are you doing in this place, Alison? What brought you here? When you left your father's house, why didn't you come straight through to the Highlands?"

"Ludovick," said she, with her eyes cast down, "how could I do that—unasked?"

"Then why didn't you write to me?"

"Wouldn't that have been just about the same thing?" she said gently; and then she looked up again—trustful and confident. "But I knew you would come for me, Ludovick!"

"Yes, I've had a long search for you, Alison; but now I've found you I don't mean to lose sight of you any more. You

must come away at once. I suppose Mrs. Cowan is not in the house?"

"She went out only a few minutes ago, but she may be back again directly," Alison said, with some apprehension appearing on her face. "Shall I go and get my things ready, Ludovick? I—I would rather be away before she came back."

"Oh, as for that," said he, "it is of no consequence to me if there were fifteen dozen of Mrs. Cowans in the house: you are coming away with me, and that is all about it. But we may as well get you away quietly if we can. I see Hugh has disappeared: he is off to get a cab, I know, and he will be back presently. And here is Johnny; you go and get your portmanteau ready, Alison, and Johnny will be waiting to carry it down to the fly."

She hurried away at once; and then Ludovick called to Johnny, who came up the steps grinning with satisfaction, for

now he knew the gun was secured, likewise the cartridges, and the stalking of hoodie-crows.

"Look here, Johnny," said he, "you go along and stand at the foot of that stair. There will be a portmanteau for you to fetch down from the room above, and you will have to carry it out to the cab when it comes. Mind you don't let any one interfere with you."

"Cosh, will there be a fight?" exclaimed Johnny, with eager and delighted eyes.

"Of course not. Only, don't let any one stop you. Drive you right through and get the portmanteau out and into the cab."

Presently an open fly was driven up, and here was Hugh, very anxious and excited.

"Isn't she ready? Isn't she ready?" he said breathlessly.

"There's no such great hurry," Mac-

donell said quite calmly. "Even if my amiable friend Mrs. Cowan turns up, what can she do?"

"You don't know what she mayn't do. She has the tremendous advantage of being a woman. If there's any kind of a difficulty, you can't knock her out of the way as you might a man. However, if Alison would only look sharp, it will be all right. What a lucky chance it is!"

Indeed, all was going well; for now they heard Alison calling Johnny to come and get down the portmanteau. Moreover, a domestic who had been summoned from some back region by this unusual commotion, having stood and gazed at these strangers for a second or two, quietly retired again: she evidently thought it was none of her business. But alas! as ill fate would have it, just as it seemed probable they were going to get easily and freely away, Mrs. Cowan appeared upon the

scene; and she had not even entered the house when she seemed to divine what was going on.

“Hoity, toity, what’s this now?” she exclaimed, with eyes sparkling with anger; and she confronted Ludovick and Hugh in the lobby. All her cringing and servile suavity was gone now; she saw the position clearly enough; she knew that if once the girl was allowed to leave the house, then farewell to all the fond mother’s hopes about the poor probationer and his prospects; this was her last chance, and she was prepared to do battle for it. “Here’s impudence!” she cried. “I’d just like to know what ye’re doing in a respectable woman’s house! Well, I declare——”

“I have come to take away my wife,” Ludovick said politely enough, “if that is what you want to know.”

“Oh, it’s you, then,” she said, with

rather panting expression—for the crisis had found her unprepared with sufficiently cutting phrases—“it’s you, then, that led astray that poor girl, and would have made a Roman of her, and a Jezebel, and—and—worse. But you’ve not done it yet ; and you’ll no do it ; for we’ve the law on our side ; and not a foot will she stir out o’ this house, or my name’s no Cowan.”

“ I’m sure I don’t know what your name is,” Macdonell said, “ and I don’t care very much ; but my wife is going away with me—now—this minute.”

“ She’s not !—she’s not ! ” the woman cried fiercely—for the sight of Johnny bringing the portmanteau downstairs seemed to drive her frantic. “ I’ll have the law ; I’ll bring a policeman ; you’re stealing these things—you’re stealing them ! She’s under my charge ; I’ll no have her carried off by a gang o’ Roman Catholics and thieves ! ”

At this moment Alison appeared, and Mrs. Cowan instantly turned to face her—barring her way, indeed.

“I dare ye to leave this house!” she cried. “Ye’re the daughter of an honest, God-fearing man, and I dare ye to go forth and bring shame on him and his house and his congregation!”

“Let me pass, Mrs. Cowan,” said Alison, who was very pale.

“I will not—I will not!” this infuriated person cried. “Ye’re under my charge; out o’ this house ye’ll not budge one step. I’ll take ye back to your room myself——”

“If you lay a hand on her,” Ludovick said—and his eyes were beginning to flash fire now—“it will be the worst day for you you ever encountered in your life!”

But she was not to be intimidated.

“Back to your room, miss!” she said; and she seized the girl by the wrist.

Well, here an extraordinary thing oc-

curred. Johnny, by some mischance, happened at this very moment to trip over the portmanteau which was lying in the lobby, and he fell forward against Mrs. Cowan—fell forward, indeed, with such violence and weight that she was sent staggering against the parlour door, which yielded, so that she stumbled backward into the room, while the heavy-shouldered lad, carried on by the impetus of his fall, rolled in after her. Instantly there was a frightful shrieking and scrimmage; but Hugh clapped to the door, and held the handle.

“Quick now, Ludovick! whip up the portmanteau, and be off with you! Get into the cab, Alison! Leave Johnny and me to come along afterwards: look sharp—or she’ll have him killed!”

Ludovick with his powerful arms seized the portmanteau, carried it down the steps and across the pavement, and swung it up

to the driver; he opened the door and helped Alison into the fly; then they drove away, and Hugh waited until they were well out of sight. Just as they disappeared round a distant corner, Ludovick looked back and waved his hand: he was laughing—doubtless over Johnny's achievement; but Alison, Hugh could perceive, still seemed frightened and was very pale. Then he thought it was time for him to open the parlour door, and see what was going on within.

But the battle raged no longer. The combatants were exhausted. Mrs. Cowan had thrown herself on the sofa, her face downward on the cushion, and she was sobbing hysterically; while her dress was in dire disarray. Johnny, on the other hand, stood erect, irate, and vengeful, regarding his enemy with lowering eyes; but he too was in woful plight—his collar hanging from his neck, his waistcoat torn

open, and blood streaming profusely from two terrible scratches that extended from his right temple all down the side of his face.

"Come away, Johnny—come away!" his master said to him.

But Johnny lingered.

"I wass giffing that tammed —— something she will remember," he said between his teeth, as he still regarded his prostrate foe. "Does she want any more?"

There was no response from the sobbing and dishevelled figure on the sofa.

"Come away, John, I tell you!"

But even when he had in a fashion dragged him out of the house, Hugh could not induce Johnny to go any farther.

"That tammed ——," he said sullenly as he was mopping his face with his handkerchief, "she had her nails in my neck. I'm not going back to Edinburgh just yet, Mr. Hugh, I know the weh there ferry well. I'm going to stay here until it is

dark ; and when it is dark I will go back. She's an ahfu' woman, that ; but, by Cosh, I wass giffing her something !”

“What on earth do you want to stay here till it is dark for ?” Hugh demanded, with some impatience.

“I want to bash the windows with stons,” said Johnny, gloomily regarding the house.

“Yes, and get locked up in the police-office !”

“That is no matter,” was all that John said.

Eventually, however, he was forced to come away with Hugh : and when they caught a tramway car, and got on the top of the same, Hugh set to work magnanimously to convince John that he had not fared worst in that fell duel.

“But just remember this, Johnny,” Hugh Munro said to this extremely disreputable-looking lad, whose torn collar could not be made to come together again.

“Consider what you’ve done. You’ve broken into a house, and carried off a portmanteau, and let a minister’s daughter run away, and committed assault and battery, and I don’t know what else. You’ll be very well out of it if you get safely back to Lochaber. What would you say now if you were taken before a judge in Edinburgh—a terrible person in a big white wig and silk robes—and if you were charged before him, what would you say?”

“Well,” said Johnny, with the most imperturbable coolness, “I would tell him I wass giffing that tammed —— as much as she was giffing me; and if he did not like the answer, I would tell him to do what wass his pleasure. For you know what they say in the Gaelic, Mr. Hugh—*‘Is coma leis an rìgh Dùghall, is coma le Dùghall co dhùibh.’*” *

* “The King hates Dugald, but Dugald does not care a straw for that.”

CHAPTER VIII.

AGNES.

WHAT strangely unexpected strands appear in this web of life we weave from day to day. When Alison Macdonell was walking through the luxuriant gardens of Monaco, between branching palm and towering cactus, and looking down the steep cliffs to the intense opaque blue of the Mediterranean Sea basking in the noonday sun, her thoughts would go wandering away back to the grimy little Scotch town, with its rain, its squalid streets and smoke-laden skies; when she stood in the mysterious dusk of Milan Cathedral, and beheld the enthroned cardinals in their

robes of purple and red, and listened to the distant sound of trumpet and viol and bassoon leading the hushed invisible choir, she would think (and with no kind of disrespect or contempt) of the bare walls and cold pews of East Street Church, and of the harsh voices of men singing, "Be merciful to me, O God" to the melancholy strains of "Coleshill" or "Bangor;" and even with her young husband by her side, laughing, talking, proud of her, assiduous in his devotion to her, and studying her every wish with a constant kindness, her heart would turn with a sort of piteous longing for reconciliation to the stern old man who had shut the door of his house upon her for ever. Ludovick did not seek to argue her out of these wistful regrets, though sometimes he good-naturedly remonstrated.

"Look here, Ailie," he would say, but very gently, "each person has to go his or

her own way in the world ; and I think, after you have got back to Lochaber, and are settled down there, and have got acquainted with the many families who will be delighted to become your friends, I think you will find yourself leading a far more wholesome and natural life than ever you did in Kirk o' Shields. Of course, if your father were disposed to make it up with us, I should be very glad. I should be very glad for several reasons ; among them, I should like to have your sister Agnes come often to stay with us at Oyre. But if he won't relent, then obstinacy and bigotry must simply be allowed to go their own way—as we go ours."

"Yes, Ludovick," she would say submissively ; and she would strive to be wholly engrossed with the various details and experiences of their travelling, though he came to the conclusion that time alone would effectually clear away these sad

fancies, these unspoken regrets, from her mind.

However, when they did eventually return home to Fort William and to Oyre House, the general welcome that awaited the young bride (which involved them in a series of visits, oftentimes to distant parts of the country), and the new and unfamiliar duties devolving upon Alison herself, were of themselves a fortunate distraction. Armed as she was with a tolerable notion of housekeeping, she had much to learn in this extended sphere; and she was in many ways a shifty and business-like young person, who had early acquired a sense of responsibility; so that Ludovick used laughingly to declare that Aunt Gilchrist's "bit lady" was developing into a solemn and awful *châtelaine*, who ought to go about in stiff black satin, with the keys of an *oubliette* dangling from her girdle. But Alison was exceedingly proud when

the success of this or the other modest little festivity at Oyre called forth gentle and polished but none the less sincere praises from the old laird, who, indeed, was now so given to talking of his daughter-in-law wherever he went, and of her beautiful nature, her affectionate disposition, her persuasive ways, her simplicity, and self-possession, and charm of manner, that he had hardly any time left for his Indian stories. And then again, if Alison had fallen in love with the West Highlands in the summer-time, consider what she thought of them in the gorgeous hues of late October. In summer, the West Highlands, when they are not darkened by black rain-storms from the west, become faint and ethereal in the haze produced by fine weather ; the mountains recede behind a veil, as it were, through which you can see the pale lilac-grays and rose-grays of their lofty peaks and shoulders, with the

shadows traced in lightest blue; but in the colder and clearer atmosphere of late October, when the brackens of the lower slopes have turned to orange, and the bent-grass of the higher slopes has withered, the hills come startlingly near, and are of a solid russet-red, with every corrie and watercourse sharply marked in deep cobalt; while as the afternoon wanes, and the skies richen in intensity, the wide calm stretch of sea becomes a lake of crimson fire. With these splendours before her, Alison could not always be thinking of Kirk o' Shields.

Aunt Gilchrist, who tarried long in Fort William this autumn, apparently for no other reason than to catch an occasional glimpse of her bit lady, whom she had befriended in a most substantial manner—Aunt Gilchrist, it was observed, would never come near Oyre House when there were any strangers or any formal dinner-

party there. She affected to be a little shy. If Hugh and Flora only were going out to have an afternoon game of tennis and to spend the evening, she would sometimes accompany them ; and she had struck up a great friendship with Mr. Macdonell ; but she kept away from Alison's new set of acquaintances. She said she was just a foolish old Scotchwoman (which was not true, for she was Highland to the backbone) who had so long been accustomed to have her own way in her own small circle, that she did not care to go among strangers ; and when Ludovick teased her by saying he knew why she would not accept these invitations—that it was because, after her goodness to Alison, she did not wish to come forward publicly to exact too much of their humble devotion and homage—she would answer significantly—

“ I've seen more o' the world than you, young sir ; and when I promised my dear

that she would go properly provided to Oyre House—that I would come and be a mother-in-law to you whenever you wanted me—I knew at the same time that a mother-in-law has to be discreet in her visits. I’ve done nothing for my bit lady but what I said I would ; ye’re not obleeged to me the least thing ; I’m happy enough when I hear her drive up to the gate and when I look out and see her blithe face coming through the garden.”

The fact was that just at this time Aunt Gilchrist’s chief companion was John. The little old dame betrayed a most unholy joy in hearing the minutest details of the encounter between John and Mrs. Cowan ; she laughed aloud at the picture of her adversary’s overthrow ; she spurred on Johnny’s imagination until his recital, elaborated day after day, rose to epic heights. At first John had been chary of bragging. Despite all his nonchalance,

there remained with him some dim vision (conjured up by Hugh's warning) of an Edinburgh judge, sitting in awful court, and with knit brows inquiring into the story of the Portobello outrage. But at home here in Lochaber he grew to disregard these vague terrors; and the more Aunt Gilchrist — chuckling, crowing, making merry over the downfall of her direst enemy—the more Aunt Gilchrist encouraged him, the more did John, with his small eyes twinkling, and his large mouth grinning, add vivid particulars to his description of the fray. He took no shame to him that his victory had been obtained over a woman. Have not other heroes been in the like case? Did not the famous and valiant Siegfried strive with and overcome that “devil's-wife,” the fierce Brunehild? The *Portobello-Lied* grew in proportions, until, from being the mere account of a cockatoo-and-monkey scrim-

mage, it became a great heroic poem, something that seemed to demand a lamenting or joyful chorus at the end of its several parts. And the first thing that caused Johnny to rise to these altitudes of invention was his inquiry about the probable cost of Mrs. Cowan's bonnet.

"Well, mem," he said to Aunt Gilchrist, while as yet the chant of triumph was in embryo, "when she put her nails into the back of my neck, I had a grup of her too; and if she tore my collar, well, I pulled her bonnet in pieces, and what is more as that, mem, when it came off all her front hair came off too——"

"That was false hair, Johnny, I'll be bound," said Aunt Gilchrist, sniggering to herself. "So the plaits came off, did they?"

"Ay, but this is what I would like to know, now; I would like to know what she would be paying for that bonnet that I

tore into bits ?” Johnny asked. “Two shullins, mebbe ?”

“Two shillings ? what are you talking about ?”

“Mebbe more as that ? Mebbe seffen or echt shullins ?” said Johnny eagerly. “Seffen or echt shullins ?”

“More likely a pound, or five-and-twenty shillings !” answered Aunt Gilchrist—and she, too, was chuckling over the destruction of this piece of property.

“Five-and-twenty shullins !” exclaimed Johnny—awe-struck in the midst of his delight. “Five-and-twenty shullins !” And then he burst out laughing. “Aw, Cosh, that’s a fine thing, now ! Five-and-twenty shullins ! That’s a good story now as ever I wass hearing ! Five-and-twenty shullins ! I will be telling that story to Macdonell when I go out to get the gun he wass promising me.”

Johnny not only got the gun and a

moderate amount of cartridges, but also permission to shoot an occasional rabbit or two when the Munroes could let him go out to pay a visit to Oyre; and it was quite remarkable how many rabbits seemed to get in John's way. He entirely failed to find any hoodie-crows; but proud indeed was Johnny when he could present the young mistress of Oyre with two or three rabbits, their legs neatly tied together with a piece of string. He would not take them into the back premises and give them to the cook; he lay in wait for Alison; and she, knowing what this murderous youth most valued, made no scruple about going into her husband's gun-room and filching from the case another handful of cartridges which she surreptitiously conveyed to John. These two were excellent friends; but Johnny got no encouragement from her to relate and magnify his onslaught upon Mrs. Cowan: the *Porto-*

bello-Lied was for Aunt Gilchrist's ears alone.

The flaming month of October burned itself out ; Aunt Gilchrist had now gone away to the Rothesay Hydropathic Establishment, to settle herself there for the winter ; and yet no message of any kind, no proffered word of conciliation, had come to Alison from the inexorable old man in Kirk o' Shields. Agnes was her correspondent ; and Agnes wrote frequently, saying smooth things and assuring her sister that in time her father would relent ; but Alison could tell, even from these letters, that her name was never mentioned, that in her old home she was as one dead and departed for ever. Mrs. Cowan was a good deal about the house, she learned. She had been instrumental in getting the servant-lass Jean dismissed—Jean having imprudently made some slighting remark about the length of the prayers at family

worship ; and Mrs. Cowan had brought down from Corbieslaw a girl to supply Jean's place, the new-comer being of a much more pious turn, though her godliness was more in evidence than her cleanliness. And every one of these letters wound up with the piteous hope that soon Alison might find some means of winning over her father from his rigid and austere isolation, showing how this gentle, nervous, sensitive creature Agnes was fretting about that unhappy estrangement.

Suddenly those letters ceased ; and Alison, wondering, wrote again and again, without getting any answer. Then she became alarmed. She went to her husband, and asked him whether she might not write to Mrs. Cowan ; and she probably would have done so had not a telegram arrived from Kirk o' Shields that confirmed her worst fears. She looked at it, breathless and dismayed. "*Your sister is*

seriously ill. She wishes to see you. Ebenezer Blair." She did not stay to consider that here was an intimation from her father that his house was again open to her ; she was not thinking of herself at all ; she was thinking only of the frail, delicate, wistful-eyed girl who had such a slight physique with which to combat any attack of disease. And when she hurriedly, and with rather a pale, frightened face, carried this telegram to her husband, she could not tell him all the anxious forebodings that were in her mind.

"You must go at once," Ludovick said, "and I will go with you. We will put up at the inn, so that we need not be in any one's way. Of course, Ailie," he added, "I am very sorry your sister is ill ; and I hope it may be only something temporary ; but there's this to be said about it—it has made it easy for your father and you to become friends again. People forget by-

goned in the face of such a crisis. And I know you have been worrying and vexing yourself about it—far more than ever you would tell me : well, here is the beginning of a reconciliation. He himself asks you to go to the house ; whereas he might have got Mrs. Cowan to send you the telegram—— ”

“ I do not care about that,” she said sadly. “ I’m afraid Agnes must be very ill.”

And thus it was that Alison found herself once more in Kirk o’ Shields, on the afternoon of a bleak and cold November day, just as the daylight, or what passes there for daylight, was falling into a sombre dusk. The people at the inn knew that the Minister’s daughter was seriously ill. It was some kind of fever, they said. She had been prayed for in the church on the preceding Sabbath. But there was something in the guarded way they spoke that alarmed Alison more than their words.

Forthwith she walked hurriedly along to East Street and to her father's house, and was admitted by the new servant-girl, Ludovick accompanying her. When she went upstairs and entered her sister's room (which used to be her room, too) the gas was already lit; her father was standing talking in low tones to the doctor; Mrs. Cowan sat by the side of the bed; an open Bible lay on the small table. The moment she made her appearance, Mrs. Cowan rose and retired to the upper end of the room; and Alison went forward on tiptoe, and knelt down by the bedside. Apparently her sister was asleep—at least her eyes were closed; her face was pale and wan and sunken; she was breathing heavily, and with sometimes a kind of shudder that seemed to pass through the wasted frame; and when Alison ever so gently put her hand on the back of her sister's hand, there was a cold clamminess

there that struck a mortal dread to her heart.

At that slight touch the girl opened her eyes—languid they were, and anxious too, and almost frightened, but there was no fierce fire of fever in them, as Alison was rejoiced to perceive.

“Have you just come, Ailie?” she said, in a weak, uncertain voice, as if breathing were difficult to her. And then she said, with a kind of troubled look, “I thought you were here last night, Ailie, but—but sometimes I don’t quite know the difference between dreaming and waking: my head is so strange. Is—is your husband here?”

“Yes, he is in the parlour,” Alison said quickly. “Would you like to see him, Aggie?”

“Yes.”

Alison went downstairs at once, and fetched Ludovick—who came forward to

the bedside without paying heed to any one in the room. Curiously enough, at sight of him, the large, languid eyes of the sick girl filled with tears.

“Come nearer,” she said.

He stooped down to listen.

“You’ll be kind to Ailie!” she said, in a piteous kind of way.

“We all try to be as kind to her as we can,” said he cheerfully. “But it is you who have got to be kind to her now. Ever since she came to Oyre, she has been wondering when you were coming to pay us a visit—a long, long visit, so that she can show you all the wonderful things in Lochaber. And that is what you have got to do now—you must make haste to get strong and well, and as soon as the doctor allows you, we’ll see what the change will do for you, and the Highland air, and Alison’s nursing.”

She only shook her head mournfully ;

and turned away from them; and once more closed the tired, heavy eyes.

Alison had thrown aside her bonnet and travelling-ulster on entering the house; and as Mrs. Cowan had now left the room, it seemed so natural that the elder sister of the patient should take the place of nurse that the doctor, before going, came forward to her, and in an undertone gave her directions as to what she should do. Down below he found Alison's husband in the parlour; and Macdonell, being anxious to hear all about the case, went outside with him, and walked some distance with him. The report he received was far from satisfactory. She had no strength of constitution to fight this nervous fever, the doctor said. She had been delirious several times. Though apparently she slept now and again, it was not real sleep; it was only a sort of dozing, during which her brain seemed to be racked by all kinds

of terrors and visions. Ludovick asked him whether there was any immediate danger ; and the doctor somewhat evasively admitted that he feared there was.

Meanwhile Alison had been left alone with her father in the hushed sick-chamber ; and now the old man with the sad, worn face had drawn his chair in to the table, and was reading aloud in solemn, monotonous tones, the Thirty-eighth Psalm, that perchance some phrase of petition or confession or consolation might reach that troubled brain. “ ‘ O Lord, rebuke me not in thy wrath : neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure. For thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore. There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger ; neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin. For mine iniquities are gone over my head : as a heavy burden they are too heavy for me.’ ” And still more impres-

sively he read out the closing verses, as if he also were joining in this appeal for Divine pity and succour. “‘Forsake me not, O Lord : O my God, be not far from me. Make haste to help me, O Lord my salvation.’”

In the silence that ensued, the sick girl began to murmur something, in an uneasy, broken, restless fashion ; and Alison leaned over to hear what she was saying. It was all about herself, she found ; it was Ailie this—Ailie that ; and apparently Agnes was addressing some third person, who she fancied was with her. Who that was Alison soon learned.

“Mother, mother,” the girl said—and now there was a curious hectic flush on her face, and the palm of her hand was burning hot—“mother,” she said, in those low and piteous tones, “you would not have let Ailie stand there crying if you could have come to her—you would have

taken poor Ailie away—you would have brought her here, with us—we should have been all together. And—and if she was here now, I should not be afraid—Ailie was always the one to help me—but—but I am afraid—oh, don't take me forward, mother!—don't!—don't!—the Lord Jesus—on the White Throne—and the golden crown, and the sickle that is to reap when the time is come to reap—it will be all so terrible!—let me wait here, mother—hide me, hide me!—let me wait here, for Ailie! And you would have pitied her, mother—they were so cruel with her—and my father not speaking to her—and she was crying when she was in the church, and when she left the house. I looked up to the skies; I thought you would be crying, too, mother, when you looked down and saw poor Ailie, that was always your favourite; but there are no tears here—only those voices that are so far away;

and I can see no one but you. No! no! —not yet!—don't lead me forward yet, mother!—I would rather wait for Ailie; and she will take the one hand, and you the other, and I will go between you—and—and my eyes cast down—and perhaps the Lord Jesus will pity me, and not be angry. Mother, if only I had something to put at the foot of the Throne!—some flowers—but there were none when I came away—it was winter and everything was dark—there were none that I could bring with me. Will He be angry, mother, that I have brought nothing with me?”

“Hush, hush, Aggie!” the elder sister said, and she put her hand on the girl's burning forehead.

And then it was that she opened her eyes again—which were fixed and staring; and she tried to lift her poor, helpless arm as if she would point to what she saw before her.

“ Look !—look !—the great white banner—and the red letters on it—do you see what it says, mother—‘ *For Sinners Slain* ’—is He coming now ? Is He coming this way, mother ? Oh, look at the thousands and thousands of them, all robed in white, and singing—don’t you hear them, mother ?—it’s Helmsley they’re singing—‘ Lo, He comes with clouds descending, once for favoured sinners slain ’—listen, mother—it’s Helmsley they’re singing—‘ Thousand, thousand saints attending, swell the triumph of His train ’—was it singing like this that Ailie heard—in the cathedral somewhere ? ”

“ Hush, dear, hush ! ” Alison said soothingly, and she moistened the parched lips with the cooling drink that stood by.

The younger sister turned her glazed, staring eyes upon Alison, and seemed to recognize her—but as part of this rapt vision.

“ Have you come, Ailie ? ” she said, in a

low, hurried voice. "Do you see them?—do you see them there?—mother has gone away—she will be back—she has gone to tell them why I had nothing to put at the foot of the White Throne—she knew I was frightened. For it is all so different now, so different! Once He said 'Suffer the little children to come unto me'; but that was when He was a poor man, living among poor people; now He is the King of Glory, the Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. 'Feed my lambs,' He said; but that was long ago; and He has forgotten now. Now He is the King of Glory—and the everlasting gates are opened before Him—oh, Ailie, He is coming!—give me your hand, quick, quick!—and be still—be still—maybe He will remember what He said once—maybe He will pity us and not be angry—I can—see—mother—pleading for us——"

She turned away with a wearied sigh ; she closed her eyelids and lay breathing heavily. And then in the silence arose the solemn tones of the Minister's voice—

“ ‘I will bless the Lord at all times : his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul shall make her boast in the Lord : the humble shall hear thereof, and be glad. O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together. I sought the Lord, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears.’ ”

So the slow hours went by ; and Alison sat there, patient and assiduous in her ministrations, and watching the strange fluctuations from burning heat to shuddering cold that marked the progress of the fever. There was no recurrence of violent delirium ; but sometimes the girl would moan and mutter to herself, in a voice so low as to be almost inaudible. It was clear

that she was not asleep ; it was mere exhaustion that kept her eyes closed.

Towards midnight the old servant Margaret came up and whispered that she had prepared some food for Alison, and that she would take her place at the bedside (for Mrs. Cowan had gone home for the present). When Alison went down to the parlour, she found her husband still there ; and she begged him to go back to the inn, but he refused to do that ; he said he could pass the night very well in the arm-chair, and preferred to remain in case he should be wanted. He did not tell her what the doctor had said.

The long night passed, slowly and wearily ; the bleak, gray morning broke over the squalid little town ; and the wan light entering by the window showed hardly any change in the condition of the sick girl, who, indeed, had fallen into a kind of stupor, taking no heed of anything, and

suffering no longer from these delirious attacks. It was a lethargy of exhaustion ; the fever had burned up the vitality of the delicate constitution ; she lay in a sort of coma, as if asleep, but not asleep. When the doctor came, he looked grave and anxious ; and he said a few words to the Minister out of Alison's hearing. He called two or three times during the day ; and he hardly strove to conceal his fear that his patient was slipping away from under his care.

Towards nightfall it was evident to everybody that she was sinking fast. Alison, Mrs. Cowan, and the Minister were in the room ; the servants were in the passage outside ; Mr. Cowan, Ludovick Macdonell, and one or two relatives were in the parlour below, waiting to be summoned. And in the silence of the sick-chamber there was only the monotonous, mournful sound of the Minister's voice.

He was walking up and down, repeating in slow and measured and earnest tones verse after verse of Scripture, that perhaps the dying girl might overhear :

“ ‘ For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised : And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain ; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.’ ”

And then again would come a pause of dreadful stillness, in which the poor woman Margaret could be heard sobbing in the passage without. But there was no faltering of the Minister's voice, no trace of emotion in the stern, sad face.

“ ‘ If a man die, shall he live again ? all the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come. Thou shalt call, and

I will answer thee : thou wilt have a desire to the work of thine hands.'

* * * * *

“ ‘ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil : for thou art with me ; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.’

* * * * *

“ ‘ Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my cry come unto thee. Hide not thy face from me in the day when I am in trouble ; incline thine ear unto me : in the day when I call answer me speedily. For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned as a hearth. My heart is smitten, and withered like grass ; so that I forget to eat my bread.’

* * * * *

“ ‘ Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters ; and he that hath no money, come ye, buy, and eat ; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without

price. . . . Incline your ear, and come unto me : hear, and your soul shall live ; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David.”

He repeated that last phrase again and again, so that she *must* overhear : “ ‘ I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David.’ ”

* * * * *

“ ‘ Thus saith the Lord ; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping ; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not. Thus saith the Lord ; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears : for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the Lord.’ ”

And surely it was to lend her courage on her entrance into the dark valley, that his voice now became even more solemn and strenuous—

“ ‘ So when this corruptible shall have

put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.' ”

Here there was a longer pause, and Agnes opened her eyes and looked languidly around, as if seeking some one. Alison instantly bent down towards her.

“What is it, dear?”

Her eyes were still looking wearily for what she could not find.

“Where—is—he?” she asked.

“Do you mean Ludovick?” Alison said—and her sister's eyes plainly answered yes.

She went hastily downstairs and brought Ludovick up and into the room. When

he came to the bedside, he instinctively took the dying girl's hand in his, for she was too weak to raise it. And then she seemed to try to say something—but was unable.

“I know,” said he, stooping over her, “I know what you wish to say to me. It is what you said last night. And you want me to make a promise? Well, then, I do ; you need not be afraid !”

Her last look was directed towards his eyes ; and it was a look of gratitude and kindness, of assurance and peace. He was still holding her hand when the change came ; and the gentle, loving spirit passed quite quietly away, almost without a struggle.

It was the strong, resonant voice of the Minister that broke the hushed silence.

“Let us give praise to the Most High that He has seen fit to take another lamb into His fold.”

And when he knelt down, and as the others knelt down—the two servants having come unbidden into the room—if the women were sobbing and crying, no tremor of emotion broke the clear tones of this old man's declaration of his acquiescence in the Divine will. What to him were the sorrows of this transitory life but as snow-flakes beating against the impregnable armour of his faith in the heavenly wisdom and mercy? Nay, this was no supplication, but rather a strenuous resignation. She who had been taken from them had been spared the trials and temptations and afflictions of years, and had entered early into the joy of her Lord. Why should we mourn, he said (almost as if addressing those grief-stricken relatives and friends), that she had won to her eternal rest a little while before others who had still to toil and fret in these earthly bonds, until the happy moment of their release should

come? Death had been conquered; their young kinswoman had been raised to everlasting life; to God be all the praise! It was a devout and sincere thanksgiving that the Minister poured forth, in measured, earnest, impressive sentences; but perhaps they had not all attained to his lofty and resolute disregard of the sufferings and tribulations of this brief moment of human existence; indeed, when the news got bruited abroad that night, there was more than one sad heart in the town, for the gentle, affectionate, frail-constitutioned girl had made many friends, even in this austere Kirk o' Shields.

CHAPTER IX.

HOMEWARD.

OF course Ludovick and Alison had to wait for the funeral ; but he did not choose that she should remain in Kirk o' Shields ; he took her through to Edinburgh, under pretence of getting proper mourning for her ; and there she was most kindly received by the Balwhinnans, who did what they could to assuage her all-absorbing grief. There also Ludovick had abundant opportunity of talking over his present circumstances with his old friend.

“ I shall be glad when I get her finally and for ever away from that place,” he said. “ It is not the right atmosphere for

her ; it never could have been. Naturally she is a most blithe and good-humoured girl, alert and merry, quite contented with everything, nothing making her so happy as seeing those round about her in full enjoyment. She is far too quick-witted, she has too much common sense, to believe in the gospel of useless renunciation—to believe in the efficacy of perpetual little martyrdoms—to measure your chance of heaven by the number of groans and sighs you can crowd into an afternoon——”

“My good friend,” remonstrated Balwhinnan, smiling and shaking his head, “you will never understand those people.”

“I understand them as far as I have seen them,” the younger man said confidently. “And what I have observed in them is plenty of faith, and plenty of hope, but not the fifteenth part of a grain of charity. Oh, I can tell you they let me know pretty clearly that I was a leper, and

to be shunned ; and what's more, Alison saw it too—though she didn't say anything ; if it had not been for this great trouble occupying her entirely, I fancy she might have given a certain Mr. Cowan a bit of her mind. Not that it mattered to me ; it amused me in a way. But the cheek of some people ! Of course they have all the religion, and all the conscience, that exist among the sons of men ; and the fashion in which they have secured a monopoly of the good things in the next world is just beautiful to behold. It seems to me, Balwhinnan, you want a modern apostle to go preaching through some of your South of Scotland smaller towns ; and I could furnish him with a text for his sermons—Beware of spiritual pride.”

“ At all events,” the advocate said, “ you are better satisfied now that you did not go to law in order to find out where the young lady was.”

“We did not appeal to the law; we broke it,” Ludovick said simply. “If that rascal of a lad had not made a most outrageous, violent, and unprovoked attack on an unoffending divinity student, I don’t see how we ever could have found out where she was.”

“But it will be all the easier for you now to make friends with the old Minister before you go back home—that is what your wife seems chiefly anxious about at present.”

“I know,” said the younger man rather gloomily. “And I don’t see much chance of it. When I first heard of that poor girl’s illness, I thought it might offer a way towards some kind of reconciliation; but I am not so sure now. And I know Alison will be fretting over her father’s loneliness. His loneliness! His loneliness seems to me merely the isolation of pride. Of course I admit that there is something

fine in the contempt or indifference he seems to have for anything that may happen to him in this world; there is something fine in that; it is worthy of Epictetus, though I suppose the Minister would call it ordinary Christian fortitude. I can see what is fine in that; even if it leads him to disregard the claims of natural affection, even if he refuses to his only daughter the trifle of sympathy and consideration she is begging and praying for in her heart. Well, I will do what I can towards making matters smooth. I will go to him and offer him my hand; I will ask him for the briefest message of kindness that I may take to Alison——”

“Don’t you think,” his friend said gently, “that it might be better for her to go herself?”

“She shall not do anything of the sort!” Ludovick said, with a flash in his eyes. “She has suffered enough already;

she shall suffer no more, in that quarter. Do you think I want a jury of elders and elders' wives to come together to consider her conduct? Do you think she is to go as a suppliant to *them*? Not while I can prevent it!"

"It was only a suggestion of mine," the lawyer said good-naturedly. "You see, you are not the most diplomatic person in the world, Macdonell; and you might go with some prejudice in your mind, some resentment, perhaps, over what happened formerly; and that might make things different. Then, again, you must remember the natural relation between father and daughter."

"What did he do before?" the younger man demanded. "He handed her over to the custody of Mrs. Cowan. I suppose she was not deemed worthy to be in his sight. She was sent away to be purified of her iniquities and transgressions; and

then she was to come back a contrite penitent. And you see she is not a contrite penitent yet. If she went all by herself to that house, she might have her sins and enormities flaunted before her again. She might have the sermon that was preached at her from the pulpit repeated for her benefit. She might have that sickening hypocrite of a woman whining over her as a brand not yet plucked from the burning. Well, then, I say 'No, thank you,' to all that. She is not going to encounter anything of the kind. I will make it my business to see she shall *not*."

The advocate scratched his head.

"Well, I don't know what the mischief is to come of it all," he said, with a perplexed air. "I wish both of you were back in Lochaber, leaving time to smooth away these differences. But if you go to this old man with such an antagonism of feeling——"

Ludovick Macdonell—who was really a most good-humoured and generous-spirited kind of person, when he was not harassed by these bitter memories—suddenly looked up, and said with a frank smile—

“You need not be afraid of that, Balwhinnan. I give you my word that when I go to see the old Minister I will abase myself down to the ground—for Alison’s sake.”

The day of the funeral was dark and grim. Over the thick smoke-laden atmosphere of Kirk o’ Shields hung leaden skies; and a continuous rain poured into the melancholy streets. The funeral service, as is customary in Scotland, took place in the house, the friends and relatives assembling in the parlour, while the coffin lay in the room above. The Minister, worn of face and sad-eyed, but still with the same air of lofty resignation and acquiescence, stood at the head of the

table, an open Bible before him, while in measured and monotonous tones he admonished this little group of sorrowing folk of the vanity and worthlessness of human life, and reminded them of the great eternal prize towards which they should be pressing, through these brief moments here below. And it was almost with tenderness, but with no break in his voice, that he referred to the young girl who had been taken away from them. She had been a faithful handmaid of the Lord. She had walked according to the light. In so far as her station and years allowed, she had been attentive to her duties ; she had been as the child Samuel, who ministered unto the Lord before Eli the priest. And even as the Lord had called to Samuel, and the child had answered, "Speak, Lord ; for thy servant heareth," so to this other young ministrant and servant He had sent His summons,

and she had answered, and gone home to her rest. Why should they weep, or doubt the infinite wisdom and mercy of Him who ruled all things, even the smallest? Their young sister in the Lord had only gone before, to her exceeding gain. And then he repeated the words of Paul to the Thessalonians: "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."

But here a terrible thing occurred. The old servant-woman Margaret, who was standing near the door-way, was taken with a violent trembling, and she sank on her knees to the floor, and raised her clasped hands above her head, and called aloud, with a piteous cry—

"Lord God, have mercy upon me! have

mercy upon me ! They're a' looking forrit to seeing her again ; the're a' to meet her there except me—except me ! She'll no come near where I am—in the everlasting fire ! Lord God, have mercy upon me ! Will ye no have mercy on a poor sinner ? Is there to be no mercy for me through all eternity ? Lord God, have peety—have peety ! ”

The Minister paused. “ Remove that poor woman,” he said, in a calm, grave voice ; and when they had raised the poor trembling wretch and led her from the room, he continued the solemn, simple, unimposing service.

When that was over, the coffin was brought down and placed in the hearse ; and as the sombre vehicle slowly moved away, the male relatives and friends (the women-folk remaining in the house) proceeded to follow it on foot, two by two, led by the Minister himself and his chief elder,

Mr. Cowan of Corbieslaw. The small, irregular black procession made its way through the rain and along these dingy thoroughfares till it reached the cemetery just outside the town. And of all the dismal sights about Kirk o' Shields, surely this was the most melancholy. Here were no white stones marking the graves of the loved and lost ones, nor carefully tended flowers in their purity and sweetness emblematic of the kind remembrance, the wistful hope, that placed them there. The head-stones were dank and sodden with wet and smoke; the bits of bushes here and there were leafless, withered, and black; the very grass was grimy. The hearse came to within a few yards of the open grave, then the coffin was taken out and carried over, and slowly and reverently lowered into its resting-place. It had but the one white wreath upon it. That Alison had brought with her from Edinburgh;

you cannot buy flowers in Kirk o' Shields if you wished. There was no service by the side of the grave. When the coffin had been lowered, the friends and relatives took a last look ; then, as the grave-diggers began their work, they fell to talking among themselves ; finally, in scattered groups, they set out again for the town and for their several homes, walking through the heavy rain. Ludovick was alone all this time ; no one had spoken to him, or taken any notice of him.

But when he returned to the Minister's house to fetch away Alison, he was surprised she had already gone, though Mrs. Cowan and one or two others of the women-folk were still there. She had returned to the inn, the servant-maid informed him, shortly after the funeral had left. So, as this seemed as good an opportunity as any for trying to come to some amicable understanding with the

Minister, he bade the servant-lass inform Mr. Blair that he would like to see him for a moment. She knocked at the door of the Minister's room and delivered her message; Mr. Blair came out into the passage, and she discreetly disappeared.

"Mr. Blair," said Macdonell, "Alison will be going away this afternoon, and she would like to say good-bye to you——"

"It is unnecessary," the Minister said calmly.

"Perhaps so," said the intermediary, in as gentle and submissive a fashion as possible, "but—but—it is only natural for a girl to wish to part on good terms with her father; and I think especially at such a time as the present there might be a—a little consideration for family ties. As for myself, I offer you my hand, and ask you to forget what is past, as I hope to do also. I don't wish to have any feeling of resentment towards any man, least of all

towards Alison's father. I know you have reason to complain of me, and though I cannot honestly say that I regret having induced Alison to enter into that hasty marriage, still I can understand how it would strike you, and I ask your pardon."

Mr. Blair did not take the proffered hand.

"It is unnecessary, perhaps something more than unnecessary, for my daughter to come here," he said, in grave, deliberate tones, and there was no expression save that customary sadness in the sunken eyes and in the worn and lined face; "and it is unnecessary for you to make explanations or apologies for that which is now irremediable. To open up these matters again might merely lead to contention and reproach, which I am far from desiring. My daughter has chosen her own path; let her follow it. I will not be her judge. Perhaps when we win to the greater light

we may see with different eyes. The Lord's ways are not as our ways; there may be guidance where we see but footsteps wandering in the dark; in His good time we shall know all. As for you, I hope I bear you no enmity; I would part with you without bitterness; but before you go I would ask of you one question. Do I understand that you have not sought to lead away my daughter from the faith of her childhood, from the faith in which those of her house who have gone before have found peace and consolation in their dying hours? I--I understood it to be so—is it so?"

"Certainly it is so!" Ludovick said with emphasis. "Alison is absolutely free in all such matters—of course she is. If she chooses to go to the Established Church in Fort William, that is simply because the Munroes go there: she may go to any church she pleases, and welcome."

“And if there are children of the marriage?” the old man said.

“If there are children of the marriage, they will be brought up in their mother’s faith; I pledge you my honour to that.”

Mr. Blair hesitated, but only for a second.

“I thank you,” he said, in the same grave, unimpassioned voice, and he seemed about to go.

“But—but have you no message for Alison?” Ludovick asked, in an appealing kind of way.

“I would not have her think there was aught of bitterness in my heart against her,” he answered; and then he added, with slow impressiveness, “Nay, I wish you both well.” And with that the Minister, reserved, austere, unapproachable, passed into his own room.

Ludovick Macdonell did not go straight back to the inn; he went along to the

unfrequented thoroughfare overlooking the canal and the iron-works; and paced up and down there (though the rain was still falling heavily), that he might make the best of this message that he had to carry to Alison. And when at last he returned, and found her standing at the window, looking out into the wet streets, he said—

“Why did you leave the house, Ailie? I went back expecting to find you there.”

She turned to him at once.

“Well, Ludovick,” said she, somewhat proudly, “I did not choose that your wife should remain there to be—to be—looked at askance.”

“Oh, you must not heed the looks, or the words either, of people like that!” said he quite cheerfully. (Perhaps he was not so ill-pleased that his young wife had resented the manner of the elders’ wives towards her.) “What are they to you? But I have brought a message for you

from your father. Oh yes; he was not nearly so implacable as you might imagine. He was quite courteous and civil, in his reserved way. Of course, he said he thought it would be unnecessary for you to go and bid him a formal good-bye at the present time, and that he would rather not have me go into any explanations or excuses; and that is reasonable. I saw that he did not want to have any controversy, such as might arise, and might produce bitterness. No; he said he had no feeling against either of us; that perhaps it might appear to him some day as if everything had been for the best; and the last words he said, Ailie, were that he wished you well. These were his last words. '*I wish you both well,*' he said. Oh, I can look forward a year or two, and see what his present attitude will lead to; but in the mean time you ought to be very glad that he is so amicably disposed

towards us. And there's another thing I've got to tell you, Ailie," Captain Ludovick continued, in the same cheerful and hopeful strain. "We are not going to set out for the Highlands this afternoon."

"No?" she said; and her face, that had been painfully anxious when he began to tell her of that interview, was now grown much more placid and grateful and content.

"No; at least, not directly back. The simple fact is this, Ailie: you are being thoroughly spoiled in Lochaber. You get such an inordinate quantity of petting that all your natural firmness of character is being destroyed. It isn't wholesome; it's far from wholesome. The old laird is the worst, it is true; but the rest of them are nearly as bad. You're being softened and blunted into a sentimental, jelly-fish sort of condition."

"But it's very nice, Ludovick," she pleaded.

“I tell you it isn’t wholesome. It is most detrimental to your character,” Captain Ludovick maintained. “You want somebody to sharpen you—to keep your wits on edge—to make you hold your own, and give an account of yourself. Well, I’m going to get such a person. I am going to take you through to Glasgow to-night. To-morrow we shall go down the Clyde to Rothesay. There I shall take possession of your Aunt Gilchrist, and carry her off with us to Fort William, and establish her at Oyre for the winter. That will counteract the petting, I think! And why shouldn’t she spend the winter with us as well as at that Hydropathic place? My gracious! haven’t we as pure drinking-water at Oyre as they’ve got at Rothesay?”

And well Alison knew what it was that had led him to make this proposal; it was no desire to provoke a series of temper-combats, good-humoured as these assuredly

would be, for his own amusement ; it was the thought that she might feel a little lonely in the world after the death of her sister, and herself removed from among her kinsfolk and former friends.

She went up to him and kissed him.

“Ah, Ludovick,” she said, with swimming eyes, “you are so kind to me !”

THE END.







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